



## STALWART FOR THE TRUTH

*An expository preacher without peer, Dr. A. H. Unruh saw many "sons" enter Christian service over six decades of inter-Mennonite teaching*



# **Stalwart for the Truth**



# **Stalwart for the Truth**

The life and legacy of A. H. Unruh

by  
David Ewert

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## **SERIES FOREWORD**

Probably no other person so dominated the Mennonite Brethren consciousness in Canada as did A. H. Unruh: educator, preacher, friend.

The Board of Christian Literature is pleased to see this tribute to the life and contribution of one of our leaders. We are especially pleased to have the tribute written by one of Unruh's students and colleagues, Dr. David Ewert, professor of New Testament, formerly of Winnipeg, now of Fresno.

And we are pleased to release this biography of Unruh, number three in the Trailblazer Series, who in practice and theory was one of the Trailblazers in the Mennonite Brethren Church's continuing pilgrimage of faith.

Board of Christian Literature  
General Conference of Mennonite  
Brethren Churches



## **FOREWORD**

In the following pages I have attempted to draw a picture of A. H. Unruh. Those readers who knew Unruh well may question some of the colors in the portrait. This is their privilege. Each of us looks at others through his or her own eyes. As an admirer of Unruh, I have concentrated on his sterling qualities and on the legacy he has left us. (I trust I am not guilty of any serious distortions.) How successful I have been, the reader must judge.

Selectivity in the choice of materials has been imperative. The sources of information for the life and work of A. H. Unruh were unusually rich. First of all, there is a vast amount of published and unpublished material from Unruh's pen—some of it autobiographical in nature. Hundreds of friends and former students of Unruh can supply interesting information from their memory. A good number of tapes with Unruh's sermons and lectures are also available.

Of course, members of the Unruh family can supply a great many details from their father's life. In addition, several friends of A. H. Unruh have given us brief life-histories or character portraits in writing.

The first comprehensive biography of A. H. Unruh was written by H. P. Toews, and appeared in 1961. Since it was written in German, it has had a limited circulation. Although Toews's book has proved to be very helpful, the following pages are more than just an English translation of his publication. I have also listed additional sources of

information in the Bibliography. To maintain a popular style, footnoting has been avoided.

A. H. Unruh's long life of service was divided almost equally between Russia and Canada. For information on his life and ministry in the old world I am dependent on written sources and the verbal testimony of relatives and acquaintances. For the Canadian chapter of his life, I had the added advantage of a personal acquaintance with Unruh.

When I was a boy, Dr. Unruh frequently preached and lectured in the Coaldale community, in southern Alberta, where I lived. I still have a collection of his sermon topics and outlines from those occasions when, frankly, he mesmerized me by his preaching. It was quite natural, then, that I should later go to the Winkler Bible School, where, one might say, I majored in 'Unruh.' Several years after graduating from this school, the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church invited Dr. Unruh to speak as well as officiate at my ordination to the gospel ministry.

When I was Unruh's student, I could not have anticipated that some day I would have the privilege of being his colleague on the faculty of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. Nor that, for a number of years we would be members of the same congregation in Winnipeg. Perhaps the highlights of my associations with Dr. Unruh were the Bible conferences in which I had the privilege of working together with him.

The preparation of this manuscript, therefore, has become a labor of love. We have tried to keep in mind those whose roots are in the new world, and not in the soil of the Ukraine. If older readers find explanatory details in the story of Unruh's Russian sojourn redundant, I would ask their indulgence.

The first part of this book is an account of Unruh's life in Russia and in the new world. The second part attempts to portray more fully the stature of the man. Part three is a kind of addendum: the end of a man's life always adds a special dimension to his life and work.

Unruh's life represents a chapter in the history of the

Mennonite Brethren Church. If this account helps to create a greater awareness of and appreciation for our spiritual heritage, it will have accomplished its purpose. If perchance Christian wayfarers can find new light, strength and direction from the example of this man of faith, I shall feel doubly rewarded.

Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1972

David Ewert



# **Part I**

## **From Russia to Canada**



# 1

## HOME IN CZARIST RUSSIA

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

### The Reign of Alexander II

Abraham Unruh was three years old in 1881 when Alexander II died at the hands of revolutionaries. Alexander was an intolerant autocrat, although to the surprise of his subjects he liberated the Russian serfs who had been in bondage to their wealthy landowners for centuries. Russia's economic and cultural backwardness embarrassed him; so he put forth a real effort to overcome some of the country's glaring weaknesses. New industries were developed, thousands of miles of railroad were constructed, and vast new territories were added.

Although freedom of speech, of the press and of religion—other than the state religion—were almost entirely lacking, Alexander's reign was characterized by considerable progress in the field of technology as well as in the finer arts, such as music and literature. The three towering literary figures of this period of Russian history were Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. These gave the world some of its greatest literature, even though many of their ideas were considered too revolutionary, particularly by those in high places.

During Alexander's reign, the Russian universities were re-shaped on western models. These universities, however, were kept under strict surveillance, since they tended to become breeding grounds for revolutionary ideas. Also, an

attempt was made to introduce classical gymnasia (*Realschulen*), but since the Russian people were still largely illiterate, most of them turned into trade schools.

Although as yet there was no compulsory primary education, the reforms in elementary education in the 1860's and 1870's were to have a profound effect on both the native Russians as well as on other ethnic groups living in Russia. When Alexander died, Russia boasted eight universities and 157 schools for the training of primary school teachers.

What affected the Mennonite communities in Russia even more profoundly than the school reforms was the introduction of compulsory military training. Alexander began his reign (1855) toward the end of the Crimean War. In his effort to overhaul the military Alexander introduced conscription. That became the occasion for many Mennonites to leave Russia in search for freedom of conscience in America. Whereas the conscription law contributed, on the one hand, to greater social equality among the Russian people—up to that time mostly those from the lower social classes served in the army—it touched our Mennonite people at a very sensitive spot. Indeed, it threatened to become their undoing as a people. It was also in violation of the earlier promise that Mennonites in Russia would be exempted from military service. After repeated representations to the government (all of which failed to secure exemption), the Mennonite community accepted alternative service in hospitals, forestry and similar civil services, at their own expense.

Although Alexander II was an absolute monarch, his reign went down in history as "the era of great reforms." The emperor was called the "czar liberator." Many of the innovations instituted by Alexander were to have a marked effect on the Mennonite communities in Russia. They were also to play a part in the shaping of A. H. Unruh's life.

It was during the reign of Alexander II that Heinrich Unruh, father of Abraham, carried on his ministry as elder of the Mennonite Church in the Crimea. His forebears, like

other Mennonites in Russia, had originally come from Holland, then settled in Prussia. In the 18th century, Catherine II had lured many of them to the rich soil of the Ukraine, with promises of almost complete autonomy in such matters as local government, schools, religious convictions and practices. In the course of time, these industrious immigrants from Prussia converted the treeless steppes of the Ukraine into flourishing grain fields and blossoming orchards as well as verdant pastures filled with herds of cattle and flocks of sheep.

Abraham Unruh's paternal great-grandfather left Prussia in 1816, after the Napoleonic War. He settled in Volhynia, a province of western Russia.

Abraham's grandfather, Benjamin, emigrated from Volhynia to the Ukraine and settled temporarily in Waldheim, a Mennonite village in the Molotschna colony—the most prosperous of the Mennonite settlements. It was here that Abraham's father, Heinrich Unruh, was born in 1845. Heinrich was but a few years old when his father left the Molotschna for the Crimea. The question of where to find new land for the expanding Mennonite communities was already becoming acute and the Crimea offered a solution to this problem.

### **Temir-Bulat**

Close to the west coast of the Crimean peninsula lay the small village of Temir-Bulat, some 33 miles away from the Black Sea port of Eupatoria. The original name of the village was Philippstal (named after Philip Wiebe, son-in-law of the famous Mennonite leader, Johann Cornies), but due to anti-German sentiments which arose among the Russians, many of the German village-names were changed. Temir-Bulast was a Tatar name.

Somewhat in contrast to the Mennonite settlements in other areas, the Mennonite villages in the Crimea had closer contact with other ethnic groups. Around them lived Tatars, Russians and Germans. For this reason the Crimean Mennonite villages, which lay scattered over wide areas, did

not develop their own local administration to any great extent, but often participated with those of other ethnic backgrounds in community affairs.

The Mennonite villagers of Temir-Bulat were mostly hard-working sons of the soil. Unfortunately, their village lands did not lie in the most fertile region of the Crimea—proverbially the paradise of Russia. The soil was somewhat rocky and not too productive. The well-kept dwellings, the stone fences along the main street, the school in the center of the village, not to mention the flourishing trees and shrubs, identified Temir-Bulat as a typical Mennonite village. The yellowish soft stone, common in the Crimean peninsula, provided the villagers with excellent building materials. The corrugated metal or French-tile roofs added a touch of elegance to Abraham Unruh's birthplace.

Around the village lay several other Mennonite communities, such as Sara-Basch, Moni and Tokultschak. Although the inhabitants of these villages were bound together by ethnic ties and a common vocation—for they were mainly farmers—not all were of the same persuasion in matters of faith. The majority of the Mennonite villagers belonged to the Mennonite Church, but there were also Mennonite Brethren, Seventh Day Adventists and others.

Temir-Bulat had also become the center of the sect known officially as “Apostolic Brethren Church” (*Apostolische Bruedergemeinde*). Founded in 1865, this movement carried its radical biblicism to the point where its adherents refused to cut their bread, but broke it, in imitation of Jesus and his apostles. This earned them the nickname of **Brotbrecher**. At the turn of the century most of them had left for Siberia.

It was in this village of Temir-Bulat, that Abraham Unruh, third-youngest son of Heinrich and Elizabeth Unruh (nee Wall), was born in 1878. Two of Abraham's brothers, Heinrich and Cornelius, were to become missionaries to India. Gerhard became a respected minister of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Benjamin was to become a prominent educator and Mennonite church-statesman. Brother Ger-

hard was elected to be a minister of the Gospel only after he came to Canada, and his ministry was a great blessing to the church.

### **Elder Heinrich Unruh**

The Unruh family was not too successful financially. Only with great difficulty was their father, Heinrich, able to wrest a livelihood from the somewhat unproductive soil of Temir-Bulat. The fault, however, lay not only with the soil. Heinrich Unruh had been chosen by the congregation to be their minister. Shortly before Abraham was born, his father was ordained as elder (bishop). Frequently, then, instead of cultivating the fields, Elder Unruh would use his horses to travel to other villages to minister to the spiritual needs of men and women.

Those were the days when Mennonite ministers generally served without financial remuneration. The churches held firmly to the teaching of Jesus, "freely you have received, freely give!" and Elder Unruh, with a deep sense of calling wanted to give what he had to give. Unfortunately for him and his family, the members of his church failed to observe those passages in the New Testament which speak of the church's obligation to support its teachers. Usually the village teachers, who had more education than the other villagers, came to be chosen as the preachers of the church. If not the teacher, then, perhaps, a more affluent farmer or owner of an estate—who would have the leisure to devote himself to the spiritual needs of the community—might be asked to do the preaching.

Elder Unruh had not had the opportunity to acquire much formal education; nor was he blessed with an abundance of material goods. Besides, he and his wife were the parents of ten children. Obviously, he performed his pastoral duties at great personal sacrifice, to say nothing of the many hardships which his ministry brought upon his family. What made his ministry particularly difficult was the fact that Temir-Bulat lay a considerable distance away

from the larger Mennonite centers over which Unruh was called to exercise spiritual care.

Frequently the neighbors saw Elder Unruh harness his scrawny horses and leave the village to preach the Gospel in other villages. Mennonite ministers in those days usually read their sermons from old sermon manuals. Elder Unruh broke with this tradition and prepared his own sermons. Evidently he was the first Mennonite minister in the Crimea to make this radical innovation. Unruh did not want to be different from the rest; nor was it easier to prepare his own sermons than to read them from some manual. But Unruh was a man who, in the language of Jesus, had tasted the wine of the Kingdom; he had come to the conviction that new wine needed new wine-skins. In his view, old forms were no longer adequate for his message.

His wife, Elizabeth (born in Schoensee, Molotschna), was a remarkable woman, and bore the added burdens cast on her by the pastoral duties of her husband with great fortitude and courage. To feed a large and growing family when the cupboard was so often bare was no small task. Nor was it easy to maintain a measure of order and decorum among ten children when father was busy in the Lord's work. Her husband felt deeply for her and for the welfare of his children and did all he could to ease her lot. One day, when working in the barn with his eldest son, who was later to become a missionary, he threw his arms around him and cried: "Son, help me to bring up your brothers and sisters!" Frequently—especially when he was preparing candidates for baptism—the family would find father Unruh on his knees before God.

Elder Unruh was a man of robust faith, but not of body. At the age of thirty-eight, in 1883, he fell prey to a fatal attack of bronchitis. Now the cry, "Son, help me to bring up your brothers and sisters," took on added poignancy. The widowed mother was left with ten children; the oldest son was only fifteen years of age. With no life insurance to fall back on, no bank account, and few earthly possessions, mother and children faced a grim future.

Abraham was five years old when Elder Unruh died; the visits he used to make to the grave of his dearly loved father made an indelible impression upon his tender soul. Frequently mother would take him by the hand, go to the grave of her deceased husband and cry her heart out. For some strange reason, the residents of Temir-Bulat did not fully understand the desperate situation of the bereaved family and did not prove nearly as helpful as they might have. By God's grace, however, the family survived this time of testing, even though the experience had far-reaching consequences for several of its members.

### Foster Parents

It seemed quite impossible for the bereft widow to find a means of livelihood for her large, fatherless family. Foster homes would have to be found for several of the children. And so, in the mysterious providence of God, Abraham had to leave his home in the Crimea at the age of five to live with his uncle Cornelius in the Molotschna.

The deep wounds which his father's death had caused had not yet healed. Then suddenly the cords of affection which tied him to his mother, his brothers and sisters, were also broken. The pain of rejection and of loneliness which Abraham suffered stayed with him through life. He would have preferred to forget—but never could.

His uncle Cornelius had a helpful influence on the boy; but his foster mother, the wife of Cornelius Unruh, did very little to make the lot of the little fellow enjoyable. Indeed, it must be said with some embarrassment, she made life miserable for him. He could do nothing right. He was blamed for everything and often endured outright cruelties and injustices because of her. She created many anxious moments for him. Uncle Cornelius, who had accepted his nephew gladly, treated him as his own son. He was delighted to have Abraham in his home since he wanted his two boys to have another playmate.

The situation was far from pleasant, but Abraham did have the opportunity to get a good foundation academi-

cally. In the higher wisdom of God he put his learning to good use later.

The Mennonites of the Crimea had no secondary school (**Zentralschule**) until 1905. The first one to be established was at Karassan, where Abraham later served as principal. For this reason, Mennonite students from the Crimea who could afford to pursue their education beyond elementary school usually went to Halbstadt or Ohrloff in the Molotschna.

Although in the case of Abraham Unruh the circumstances were most unusual, as well as somewhat tragic, he had the opportunity to attend the best schools found anywhere in the Mennonite colonies at the time.

## 2

### FOUNDATIONS IN EDUCATION

"From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation."

#### Uncle Cornelius

Uncle Cornelius was for many years a teacher in the secondary school (**Zentralschule**) at Ohrloff, in the Molotschna. He began to teach at 17 years of age. Those who remember him testify not only to his great thirst for knowledge, but also to his intellectual capacities, coupled with great reserves of physical strength.

Frequently he went off to Ekatrinoslav, Kiev or Odessa for special courses. He studied for three years in Switzerland and for a year in Moscow (together with the historian P. M. Friesen). He was fluent in French, Russian and German. Some of his acquaintances insist that he was the most informed man in the Molotschna colony. Certainly he was one of the most influential men, for he was principal of the Ohrloff secondary school for 32 years. With his training and his capacity for work he was able to publish a number of textbooks for use in Mennonite schools. One needs only to leaf through his 500-page German Reader—**Deutsches Lesebuch fuer die Zentralschule in Russland**—to appreciate the intellect of Cornelius Unruh. In the home of Uncle Cornelius the Christian faith also, as his uncle understood it, was taken seriously. Yet there was a lack of religious warmth for which the young Abraham reached out. Uncle Cornelius was a minister of the Mennonite Church, but

spiritual matters were seldom discussed freely; particularly not personal spiritual problems. So the spiritual conflicts and concerns of the little nephew went largely unattended.

To his uncle's credit, however, it should be said that Cornelius was a man of high moral principles and of integrity; Abraham had no difficulty respecting him. He always admitted that he learned much from him, and felt forever indebted to him.

Sunday worship services were attended by the family without fail. From the sermons which Abraham heard as a boy he gained some valuable biblical knowledge, but more often than not the sermons seemed dreadfully long and windy. The congregation sang mainly German anthems, with little enthusiasm or conviction. Anthems, sermons read from antiquated sermon books, and silent prayers added up to an incredibly boring time. These somewhat disconcerting religious experiences in his childhood may explain in measure why Unruh later developed a kind of aversion for anything that savored of lifeless, mechanical liturgy.

Occasionally Mennonite Brethren ministers visited the home of Uncle Cornelius. The neighbors, too, were Mennonite Brethren. This family opened its home on Sunday afternoons to the children of the community. Here the children received personal attention, and the way of salvation was explained to them in terms which they could understand. Since the Bible was a subject of instruction in Mennonite schools, the children were informed on the historical facts concerning God's way of redemption, but normally the instruction went no further. In this particular 'Sunday school' the emphasis lay primarily on the experience of salvation through conversion.

Although Uncle Cornelius never stressed conversion, he believed in it. And, quite in contrast to many Mennonite ministers of his day, he believed in the possibility of child-conversion. On one occasion, when this question was publicly debated, Cornelius Unruh argued that if a fourteen-year-old could engage in immoral activities, then

surely he was old enough to experience a conversion from sin.

Altogether, Abraham was exposed to many wholesome influences. In spite of the fact that his aunt often treated him harshly and unjustly (she begged his pardon when she was old and widowed, and he forgave her), Abraham's childhood was not all dark and gloomy. Children seem to have a marvellous ability to look beyond tragedy and to enter into the small and innocent joys of life with great gusto. Poverty, death, mistreatment and loneliness did not sour Abraham, although those who knew him closely, claim that he carried psychological scars from his childhood for the rest of his life. On the whole, however, his childhood years were happy years, and he never forgot the kindness of his Uncle Cornelius, who took him into his home and from whom he learned so much.

### Elementary School

Ohrloff and Tiege lay so close to each other that the traveler hardly knew when he left one village and entered the other. In Tiege, an outstanding teacher by the name of Isaac Ediger was head of the elementary school. Ediger was an exacting schoolmaster who permitted no slovenliness in his classroom. But more than that, Ediger had a living faith. Like so many village teachers, Ediger was also a minister of the Gospel—a task which he carried out with great devotion.

It was no small mercy that Abraham should have come under the tutelage and influence of this godly man during his first years in school. Never could he forget the last period one Friday afternoon, when Mr. Ediger stood before his students and told them the story of his conversion. It was one of the incidents which prepared Abraham for the day when he would become a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Although Ediger was greatly concerned about the spiritual life of his students, he was also concerned that they progress academically. He soon discovered that

Abraham was a precocious lad, so gave him extra help. In this way Abraham completed in five years what ordinarily took seven or eight.

In Mennonite villages, all children between the ages of 7 and 14 were obligated to attend school. Instruction was given in both Russian and German. The first period each morning was generally given to the teaching of religion. The school year lasted eight months—from September first to the first of May—and closed with public ceremonies at which the children demonstrated before the villagers what they had learned.

Although elementary school education in Russia lagged far behind that of Western Europe, the Mennonite schools were in no sense culturally backward. In 1876 the Mennonite schools won state recognition. It has been said that there was hardly a pedagogical idea to arise in Western Europe with which Mennonite educators did not become conversant. What the schools lacked in breadth, they possessed in depth.

Abraham's elementary school experience was a pleasant one. Never once, so he claimed, had he seen Mr. Ediger angry. When punishment had to be administered it was usually well-deserved. What added to the delights of those early school years was the friendliness of the teacher's wife. She loved the students as well and occasionally surprised them with goodies.

In later years it was Unruh's privilege and Ediger's joy to join together in the proclamation of the Good News. By then they stood together as equals in the cause of the Kingdom. On one occasion, when Unruh publicly disagreed with his former teacher on a point of biblical interpretation, he admitted that such disagreement with his highly respected teacher came only with great inner pain.

### Secondary School

The village of Ohrloff was founded in 1809 with money donated by Czar Alexander I. It was here that Abraham lived in the home of Uncle Cornelius. The secondary school

in the village was the brain-child of the famous Johann Cornies. The first teachers of this *Zentralschule*—as the secondary schools were called—had come from Germany, since the Russian Mennonites did not yet have schools for teacher training. The school had been established in 1848 and was roughly the equivalent of our grades 9, 10 and 11.

After completing elementary school in Tiege at the age of 12, Abraham was ready to enter the secondary school at Ohrloff. During the three years that he spent here he had able teachers, some of them outstanding. There was, of course, uncle Cornelius, with his great store of knowledge. Then there was Johann Braeul, who came from a family of teachers. He, like Cornelius Unruh, had studied in Moscow and Odessa—something that was not encouraged by Mennonite leaders at the time. There was always the fear that Mennonite students would be exposed to new and unsettling ideologies. Braeul taught at Ohrloff right up to his death in 1915.

Another outstanding teacher was Johann Janzen, one of a few artists among the Russian Mennonites (Some of his paintings have found their way to Canada). He was also a poet and a writer. He had studied pedagogy for three years at Theodosia in the Crimea, and had become a religious sceptic. About the year 1906 students and others noticed a marked change in Janzen's religious outlook. Later he served effectively as a minister of the Gospel, but continued to teach at Ohrloff till 1915.

Men such as these gave Abraham Unruh a solid foundation in the basic academic disciplines of that day. Today we may have serious reservations about some of the pedagogical methods in vogue a century ago, but a later generation will probably smile at those which are currently popular in our country.

The strong emphasis in the Mennonite schools at the turn of the century was on the mastery of a limited body of knowledge. This has some advantages also; Abraham Unruh was always grateful that a great many facts had been fixed firmly in his mind during his school years. Later,

as a counsellor to fellow-ministers, he would often advise them to get a firm grasp of a core of factual information in several areas of knowledge. These, he argued, would stand them in good stead in preaching. Like the Baptist preacher, Spurgeon, he was a bit wary of laying empty hands on empty heads at ordination. Uncle Cornelius, Braeul and Janzen did their best to fill Abraham's head during his years at the Ohrloff **Zentralschule**.

It should be added, however, that a number of his teachers in secondary school were far more concerned about academic excellence than about the spiritual needs of the students. Never, in Unruh's memory, did some of them speak about conversion. Religion was taught as an academic subject and as a means of strengthening moral ideals. Even so the students gained valuable information about the Bible, but for may it was no more than a text book—dry and dusty like others.

In some cases the way the religion classes were conducted created an aversion to the Christian faith. In others the knowledge of biblical facts gained at school was fanned into flame by the Holy Spirit and became “the word of truth, the Gospel of salvation” when the students later were confronted with Jesus Christ.

European schools at this time were characterized by a certain distance between teachers and students. Teachers tended to be quite aristocratic in their bearing and, although a certain amount of distance is necessary and good, the gulf between students and teachers was often greater than necessary. Unruh's experience at the **Zentralschule** was no exception in this respect. Although he did not look upon his teachers with animosity, he was hardly able to call them friends.

The students at Ohrloff took delight in deceiving their teachers. They played mean tricks on them—when they were reasonably sure that they could get away with it. Often, when they were caught, they lied quite unashamedly. As may be expected, they got their share of whippings—the standard form of discipline in those days (a slight

improvement over kneeling on hard peas or the other punishments of earlier days).

Order in the classroom was generally good, although this order was often achieved with many whippings. But there were also many eager students who enjoyed discovering new facts and who were eager to move ahead. Abraham was one of these, although he, like some of the other boys, also enjoyed the occasional prank.

Teachers generally took great pride in seeing their students excel in their final examinations. Ordinarily, students completed elementary school at fourteen, and secondary school (*Zentalschule*) at seventeen. Abraham was able to complete his secondary education at fifteen. With plenty of wit, a bit of extra enthusiasm, and the inspiration and help of his uncle Cornelius, he was ready to enter teacher's college to prepare himself for his calling.



# 3

## THE MAKING OF A TEACHER

"And his gifts were that some should be . . . teachers, for the equipment of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building of the body of Christ."

### The Days of Alexander III

Unruh's school years coincided with the reign of Alexander III (1881-1894), the last of the absolute monarchs in the Romanov line. The press was muzzled. Universities lost much of their autonomy and were put under stricter state control, including purges of student activists from time to time. Contrary to established education policy, children now were to receive an education appropriate to their social status; boys from the lower classes were discouraged from entering schools of higher learning. Aggressive nationalism and stronger ecclesiastical control of education went hand in hand. Religious intolerance was on the upsurge. The Stundists, for example, were severely persecuted in 1894. Shortly after this in 1899, in order to escape indignities and incarceration, the Doukhobors emigrated to Canada. About this time also, Abram Kroeker was prepared to print a Christian calendar, but he had to wait five months before the Russian censor gave his permission. Anyone opposing the policies of Alexander could count on heavy reprisals by his police regime—characterized by narrow nationalism, religious and racial intolerance.

Since dissenting opinions were silenced, the country seemed to enjoy the blessing of stability and order. But the

revolutionary forces, driven underground, were soon to show that the outward facade of security and peace was illusory. Terrorism flared up from time to time. One terrorist who died on the gallows was Ulyanov, brother of Lenin, who was to become the mastermind of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

The Mennonite villages were less directly affected by these situations in higher circles. This was not because of lack of interest in current affairs. Rather it resulted from the absence of an efficient communications system as well as because of the special status which the Mennonite community enjoyed under the Czars. Since they had a great deal of independence—a privilege the average Russian citizen did not have—the decisions made in St. Petersburg did not touch the Mennonites so directly. As long as they remained in the good graces of the local religious leaders of the Orthodox Church (one way to do that was to refrain from proselytizing among the Russians), as long as the Russian language and Russian history were given their proper place in the Mennonite schools, and as long as the Mennonite men fulfilled their state duties by performing alternative services, they were assured of a good degree of peace and prosperity.

One privilege which Mennonites appreciated particularly was that of training their own teachers for their elementary and secondary school system. The year in which Abraham Unruh was born (1878), a Mennonite teacher-training school was established at Halbstadt, in the Molotschna. This school offered two years of training in pedagogical methods and academic subjects, coupled with practice teaching. To receive a state teacher certificate, however, graduates of these Mennonite schools of education had to pass the examinations set by the Russian authorities. In some instances examinations turned out to be a real nightmare.

#### Teacher's College at Halbstadt

Uncle Cornelius never asked his nephew, Abraham, what

he would like to do in life. He simply assumed that Abraham would be a teacher. And so, without much discussion, fifteen-year old Abraham enrolled in the education classes at the Halbstadt's teacher's college. He confessed later that he had been ridiculously young for the kind of studies carried on at the Halbstadt school. Not only did he fail to comprehend the educational ideals which the teachers were seeking to instill in the students, but he had also been ill-prepared to enjoy the freedom and independence offered him at this school of higher learning.

From 1816 the village of Halbstadt had been the seat of the district administration of the Molotschna settlement. It also had the largest number of industries and other institutions. The Halbstadt **Zentralschule** was founded in 1835. In 1874 a school for girls was established. In 1878 a two-year pedagogical course was added to the curriculum of the **Zentralschule** in Halbstadt.

Until Unruh entered teacher's college he had been under the guardianship of his uncle. Now, at fifteen, he lived in a dormitory with no parental or other authority to regiment his personal life. Moving suddenly into an adult world was at first a bit frightening and unsettling. Although certain principles of moral conduct had become ingrained in his thinking, Abraham was still quite at sea in his spiritual life, and had not yet committed his life to Christ.

In those days the Mennonite teacher was a community leader; he normally had more education than anyone else in the village. For this reason teachers were frequently chosen to be preachers of the village churches. Usually they taught for many years in the same village, so that two or three generations of villagers might have had the same teacher. This enhanced the prestige of the teacher and increased the respect with which he was generally treated. Teachers tended also to think of themselves as belonging to the upper level of society. Young men, aspiring to this profession, felt obligated to guard the dignity of their vocation. This high sense of calling inspired Abraham to

conduct himself with discretion and to use his time and energy for the perfecting of his teaching abilities.

The teachers of the teacher training school appeared to care even less for the spiritual development of their students than the teachers Abraham had had in secondary school. Perhaps they felt that the students were mature enough to solve their own problems. Of course, some of the teachers could not have helped these budding teachers in spiritual matters, even had they cared to do so. Sad to say, some of them were strictly professional men, and thought of their teaching simply as a job by which they earned their daily bread. Uhruh felt that some of his instructors in teacher training did not really inspire him to look upon teaching as a holy calling.

What they did teach him was self-discipline and methods by which to discipline students. Interestingly, it was from a Russian teacher, who taught Russian language and literature at the teacher's college, that Unruh learned what it meant to treat students with respect—an ideal which he resolved to realize as soon as he began to teach.

The library of the education college at Halbstadt left much to be desired. But the emphasis in the curriculum was not on research projects anyway. The school kept its main purpose constantly in mind: to prepare teachers. Various techniques of verbal communication were tested and tried. Theories of education, both past and present, were evaluated. Whatever happened to be in the air in Western European educational philosophy was discussed in the teacher-training classes. Students also got their fill of practice teaching. When they were through with their pedagogical training, most of them could say well what they had to say. Some students excelled in rhetoric. This discipline in verbal communication, combined with native ability, was to serve Unruh well, not only in the classroom but particularly in the pulpit.

### A Russian Teaching Certificate

Unruh's final year of teacher training—1894—marked the

end of the reign of Alexander III, and the heavy mantle of absolutism fell on the frail shoulders of Nicholaus II. No one could have predicted at the time that Nicholaus and his German-born wife, granddaughter of England's Queen Victoria, would mark the end of the long line of Russian Czars. The first years of his reign were uneventful, but behind the serene facade powerful forces were at work preparing the way for the overthrow of autocracy as well as, eventually, the destruction of all established social and economic institutions.

Immediately upon completion of his pedagogical training at Halbstadt, Unruh (still a teenager of 17) sat for his Russian state exams. He went to the city of Berdjansk, situated on the Sea of Asov, where he appeared before the Russian examiners, who decided to fail him. Abraham decided then that he would go to Melitopol to prepare for a re-take examination. But the Russian examiners had no intentions of letting the seventeen-year-old Mennonite boy off the hook too easily, so they failed him a second time.

However, Unruh refused to give up. Together with several other Mennonite fellows, he applied for the examination at Pavlograd. This board of examiners received quite a different impression of Unruh. Indeed, they were impressed with his knowledge and comprehension, so he was granted the coveted teacher's certificate. At a party which followed the successful passing of the examinations, Unruh's practice of total abstinence was put to a test when he was offered wine for the toast to the successful candidates. He explained politely that he did not drink strong drink and came through the experience with a good conscience.

### The Young Schoolmaster

On September 18, 1895, Abraham Unruh stepped into the classroom of an elementary village school as a fully qualified teacher. After spending 12 years in the home of his Uncle Cornelius and in school in the Molotschna, Abraham returned to the Crimean Peninsula, where he was born. In the little village of Menlertschik, about five miles from the

larger village of Spat, Unruh was to have his first real taste of teaching.

Only about 15 years earlier Mennonite settlers from the Molotschna had purchased some 24,000 acres of land and established the villages of Spat and Menlertschik. The land was fertile and crop failures were almost unknown; so by 1912 the land was paid for. Spat lay on the main postal route that cut through the Crimea from north to south, not too far from the city of Simferopol.

As in other Mennonite villages, the school with its teacherage stood in the center of the village of Menlertschik. When Unruh first arrived, he was quite self-conscious, for the villagers looked upon the teacher with high regard. He felt as if everyone had a sharp eye on him. Naturally, he was greatly concerned that he win the confidence of the Mennonite villagers. What helped to soften the initial shock of the new experience was the fact that Unruh had a married sister—Mrs. Wall—in Menlertschik.

He tried to be on his best behavior at all times and soon got the respect of his neighbors. They discovered also that he had what it took to conduct a school properly. Although he was but a youth and in his loneliness would have loved to associate with the young people of the village, his calling forbade him this innocent pleasure. His society contacts were rather with the parents of the school children. We can only imagine how lonely and socially deprived the seventeen-year-old schoolmaster must have felt at times.

### Mother

Aside from an occasional visit since his father died, Abraham had been away from his mother most of the time. But mother had held him in her heart all these years; he had often been in her prayers. Now he was a teacher. Naturally she was proud of his accomplishments. But she was also greatly concerned. For her the Christian faith had become a deep reality; she prayed that her son would also commit his life to Christ.

It pained her also that she had done so little for Abraham. Perhaps there was a slight feeling of guilt as well because the five-year old had been given away when father died. In any event she wondered what she could do for him. She thought of moving to Menlertschik to take care of him—cook for him, do the washing, and be his mother again. But first she had to feel him out on this matter. Perhaps he would not even want her around. He was now grown up, and moved about in an adult world. How delighted she was when Abraham responded that nothing would please him more. He wanted her to come and live with him in the teacherage at Menlertschik. So after years of separation they were united once more.

Mother was unsophisticated in her ways so she had some trepidation about sharing the house with her learned son. Above all, she hoped that there would be no conflict in their religious convictions. She arrived before school began and was comforted immediately when Abraham stepped into the classroom and announced the beginning of the school year with the singing of the hymn: "Jesus, Thou Alone . . . . (**Jesus du allein** . . .) She felt much more secure with him after that. It was only after Abraham had committed his life to Christ, however, that the fellowship between mother and son took on real depth and meaning.

Now that mother lived with Abraham, other brothers and sisters came to Menlertschik from time to time; thereby the family bonds were strengthened once again.



# 4

## THE KNOWLEDGE OF SALVATION

“What shall I do to be saved?”

### Not By Works of Righteousness

In spite of the high principles of morality which Unruh had accepted and which he tried to put into practice in daily life, he had no assurance that God had accepted him as a child. On the contrary, he had a guilty conscience. He confessed later that God's law had become a taskmaster for him. God's law showed him that all his moral attainments amounted to very little, that he was a complete failure before God and that he needed forgiveness for his sins. All his righteousness became for him, in the words of the prophet, “filthy rags.”

Together with his mother he prayed that God would deliver him from an evil conscience. The search for assurance of salvation had begun long before he came to Menlertschik. In the hope of finding light for his spiritual darkness he had gone to hear the itinerant Mennonite Brethren preacher, Jacob Reimer, expound the Scriptures at Schoental. Reimer himself had been a Mennonite teacher for several years when he was led to a personal knowledge of Christ through the preaching of the British evangelist, Dr. F. W. Baedeker, who performed outstanding service for Russian prisoners. Reimer then had resigned as teacher, was baptized in the Mennonite Brethren Church, and up to the age of 87 never ceased expounding God's plan of salvation.

As Unruh listened to the Good News, his inner being cried out for light. How happy he would have been had someone spoken to him about his spiritual problems. With all his religious knowledge he did not know how to proceed as he faced the greatest decisions of his life. But no one felt led to help him. And it was in this frame of mind that he began to teach at Menlertschik. He lacked the assurance of salvation.

On one occasion, Mr. Martens—a Mennonite evangelist who was founder and director of the school for the poor (*Armeneschule*) at Ufa near the Ural Mountains—came to conduct a service in the village where Unruh taught. At the end of the service Martens led in prayer and asked others to follow. Abraham Unruh could no longer contain himself and publicly called on the name of the Lord.

After the meeting, Martens embraced Unruh and said to him: "Why, you are my brother!" Unruh did not say much for he still had no assurance that God had accepted him or that he had the right to call himself a child of God.

### By Grace Alone

One evening he walked up and down in his room in great spiritual distress. Suddenly there flashed into his mind the thought that there was absolutely nothing he could do toward his salvation. He had known all along that man can be saved by the grace of God alone, but the truth had never become an experiential reality for him.

It was a Zinzendorfian hymn that clinched the great truth that salvation was a gift of God: "Jesus, thy blood and righteousness, my beauty and my glorious dress." Uhruh said to himself as he meditated on these words: "When I appear before the judgment bar of God, I will say to God 'I have nothing; but there is Jesus who atoned for my sins'." At that moment a shaft of light shone into his heart. He dared—as he later confessed—to embrace by faith the simple but profound truth that Jesus had suffered and died for his sins, that his sinful past was forgiven and that the righteousness of Jesus Christ was now his own.

The message of the free grace of God—offered in the Gospel to undeserving sinners—became one of the absorbing themes of Unruh's preaching in later years.

The grace of God which Unruh had experienced and by which he was now assured of salvation, he understood as a 'disciplining' grace. While he basked in the joy of forgiveness, he felt constrained to set right some public wrongs of his past life. He explained later in his concern that Satan could bring past sins to his attention again and again in the future, and that he might then begin to doubt the forgiveness of God. To put it in his own words: "I cut down the bush behind which Satan desired to hide in order to oppress me. I wanted a good conscience towards all men."

### Baptism in the Mennonite Brethren Church

Unruh understood that membership in the Body of Christ—of which he had been assured by God's Spirit—implied membership in a body of believers. Also, he knew his New Testament well enough to understand that the way to identify with such a brotherhood of believers was by baptism. Most of the residents of Menlertschik were members of the Mennonite Church (known in America as 'General Conference'). Since several of the determining influences which had led to his conversion had come from Mennonite Brethren quarters, and since the Mennonite Church at that time did not yet take a very clear position on the matter of believer's baptism, Unruh decided to identify with the Mennonite Brethren Church. So he applied for baptism in the Mennonite Brethren Church in the neighboring village of Spat.

The Mennonite Brethren Church was only some 35 years old when Unruh applied for membership. It had emerged out of spiritual renewal movements in 1860; following a period of storm and stress it was experiencing rapid growth. Central in its teaching was the doctrine of conversion—so much was this the case the Unruh later feared the Mennonite Brethren had made a 'work of righteousness' out

of this great biblical truth. To be accepted as a candidate for baptism, it was expected that every member of the church tell the 'story' of his conversion before the assembled body of the local congregation.

Unruh did not wait until his baptism for an opportunity to tell of his conversion. His pupils in school were the first to hear of it. He began to invite his day school students to the school on Sunday afternoons, when he could stand before them not so much as schoolmaster but as soulwinner and pastoral counsellor. Of course, he taught them Bible stories during the week. But at these Sunday afternoon gatherings he was more personal and tried to make the way of salvation plain to them. Also, he conducted youth meetings and even organized a choir—although, as he confessed later, his gift lay more in the art of 'letting others sing' than in doing the singing himself. The Mennonite villagers of Menlertschik had no objections to any of these activities.

The Mennonite Brethren Church had taken root in the Crimea. Revivals, sparked by itinerant evangelists from older Mennonite colonies, had led to the conversion of many Mennonite settlers from older Mennonite colonies in the Crimean Peninsula. This led to the organization of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the Crimea, with its center at Spat. The first baptism took place in 1885, and the first church building of the newly formed church was erected in 1887. The Mennonite Brethren Church at Spat had the good fortune of having some outstanding leaders in its ranks. Men such as Abram and Jakob Kroeker and others came from Spat. These ultimately influenced the whole Mennonite brotherhood by their publications.

The Mennonite Brethren Church at Spat invited Abraham Unruh to appear before the congregation and to share with them his experience and understanding of the Christian faith. After giving an account of his spiritual pilgrimage, the congregation was convinced that Unruh's faith was genuine and they were happy to comply with his

request for baptism. There were no other candidates at the time, but the church was willing to arrange for a baptism, nevertheless.

The believers gathered at the Salgir River and one of the deacons baptized Abraham. Due to the influence of the Baptists, the Mennonite Brethren Church had chosen immersion as the form of baptism. This form of baptism was also a way of setting themselves off more clearly from the church which they had left behind. In the heat of controversy the mode of baptism at times became more important than the meaning of the rite. But, modes aside, the Mennonite Brethren tried seriously to recapture the Anabaptist understanding of the believer's church.

Although Unruh believed firmly that immersion was a more truly biblical mode of baptism, he severely criticized those who felt spiritually superior because they had been immersed. This, to his way of thinking, came dangerously close to 'boasting in the flesh'. He also objected to the exclusiveness that some Mennonite Brethren developed in their attitude toward believers of other persuasions in the matter of baptism. To the end of his life he was pained by one occasion, while living at Barwenkowo, when a young man from the Mennonite Church asked for the privilege of sharing in the Lord's Supper with the Mennonite Brethren. Unruh's congregation denied this young man that privilege. "**Man machte die Untertauchungstaufe zum Schlagbaum am Tische des Herrn,**" he reflected later. (Baptism by immersion was made a barricade to the table of the Lord).

Fortunately there were no obvious tensions between Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Church in the village of Menlertschik where Unruh taught. Otherwise, his baptism and reception into the Mennonite Brethren Church might have jeopardized his position. As it turned out, the parents of his students in Menlertschik, regardless of persuasion, were rather delighted to see Unruh assume the role of spiritual leader among the younger set. It should be noted, of course, that Unruh did more than hold religious meetings with children and youth. He tried also to

organize other wholesome activities for the young people, not merely to give them something to do or keep them out of mischief, but to help them develop a healthy social life.

### Growth in Grace

After Unruh had made public his Christian commitment, and had received baptism, it was only natural that the villagers should look at the young teacher with a somewhat sharper and more critical eye. Unruh sensed this, but it was a challenge for him to live up to the high expectations of his neighbors—by God's grace. What helped to stabilize him in his Christian way was the presence of a godly mother. Unruh, in later years, never ceased to stress the importance of a praying mother. He insisted that the greatest blessing God could bestow on a human being was a truly devout mother.

Unruh was also greatly helped in his spiritual growth by the reading of good devotional literature. He was limited largely to German writings in the Pietistic tradition. Other than printing several textbooks for schools, Mennonites in South Russia had not yet really entered the field of publication. In part this was due to the strict censorship of the Czarist regime. Unruh read the **Brossamen** (Bread Crumbs) of Polak and the **Aphorismen** of Keller with great eagerness. The books of Samuel Keller captivated Unruh's interest in particular, and proved to be a great help to the young Christian school teacher.

Besides this somewhat limited literary fare, Unruh was able to obtain a number of British and American books in translation. He devoured Spurgeon's sermons eagerly as well as the books of P. Smith (who inspired the Keswick Movement) and the writings of R. A. Torrey. Since the latter writers taught a second work of grace, the question of a post-conversion 'baptism or special 'infilling' of the Spirit was a topic which was discussed with great seriousness.

Since the Mennonite Brethren Church had gone through a kind of charismatic upheaval shortly after its beginnings in 1860, many brethren were wary of spiritual enthusiasm.

Unruh, however, wanted all that the Lord had to offer his children, so he too sought the 'Spirit-filled' life with all earnestness. The Lord then showed him that to live a Spirit-filled life was to follow Christ in daily obedience to his Word.

This kind of Christ-life, Unruh knew, required divine strength, but it did not do away with an individual's humanity. Later, one of his favorite sayings was: "We want holy human beings and not super-human saints." What made him cautious about making claims of supernatural, transforming experiences, was the note of arrogance that he discerned in such confessions. He had come into the Kingdom of God trusting in God's grace alone and not in his own merits. Now he was afraid of making great spiritual 'experiences' the basis of a more privileged position before God. The ground for his acceptance before God was to be Christ's grace offered in the Gospel and not some crisis-experience. He realized, too, that there was no short-cut to Christian perfection; rather that followers of God were called upon to "strive after holiness" all their lives, and that this takes place in day by day Christian discipleship. For Unruh this meant faithfulness in his daily work, maintaining good relations with other people, integrity in financial matters and the confession of his faith before others.



# 5

## THE SCHOOL TEACHER

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them . . . he who teaches, in his teaching."

### Learning the Ropes

Uncle Cornelius had said to Abraham: "Abraham, you are going to be a teacher." That had settled the matter when Abraham was but a child. Now he had attained to this high calling and he was determined to make the best of it. Menlertschik was not a large village, so Unruh began his teaching with only some 25 children in school. He not only taught but performed all the janitorial duties. This meant, among other things, fetching straw daily to burn in the stove.

For eight years he taught at Menlertschik, constantly refining his methods and developing his competence generally. To equip himself more adequately, and also to guard against mental deterioration, Unruh frequently enrolled in summer courses offered in Russian institutions in the nearby city of Simferopol, or in the somewhat more distant Perekop. In this way he perfected his knowledge of Russian and mathematics. He tried hard to develop his musical skills as well, but he confessed many times that his gifts in this area were quite modest. In spite of his lack of competence in this field, he encouraged singing in the village school and tried to develop an appreciation for good music. Not only did he know countless hymns and folksongs from memory, but he was not altogether ignorant

of some of the classics. Later, when the Mennonite Brethren Bible College developed a strong music department—which was frequently subjected to sharp criticism—he showed a greater understanding for what the music faculty was trying to do than many of his juniors, who might have been better acquainted with the objectives of a music department.

Generally in the Mennonite schools in Russia, students moved with fear and trembling in the presence of their teachers. But Unruh was different; he did his best to befriend his students. Although, like other teachers in his day, he drew the reins of discipline fairly taut, Unruh mixed liberal doses of love and friendship with justice. And, strangely, his friendliness in no way destroyed good order in the classroom.

Children, of course, respond quickly to friendship; so Unruh found it hard to shake them off after school hours. On one occasion when they imposed on him unduly, he shrugged them off by asking them to join him in prayer. Although that did the trick, he admitted later that he had been less than sincere in this expression of piety.

That he took an interest in the individual child can best be illustrated by his experience with a German Lutheran boy named Stefan. All the efforts of the teacher to teach the little fellow to read ended in failure. So Unruh gave up on him. But he never forgot Stefan; in later years this experience often pained him. "If only I had been more patient," he would moan, "perhaps Stefan could have learned to read."

Unruh took pride in his well-behaved and industrious students. Several years after his marriage his wife heard him boast playfully that his students behaved and did their work even when he was absent from class. With her uncanny knowledge of human nature, she thought this was a bit incredible, and ascribed the claim to her husband's vanity. To satisfy her curiosity, she sneaked up to the classroom one day when she knew the teacher was absent and peaked through a crack in the door. To her utter

amazement the students were quietly working at their lessons. It strengthened her faith in her husband's calling and put somewhat in doubt her belief in the depravity of children.

Monthly teacher's conventions were always a highlight for Unruh, for these provided an opportunity to meet with kindred spirits. Also, such meetings provided him with intellectual oases in the cultural deserts which some of the Mennonite villages in those days represented. Moreover, to meet with one's peers and to discover what fellow-teachers were doing proved at times to be a humiliating experience; it kept those teachers who worked in relative isolation from developing inflated self-images. Rubbing shoulders with superior men helped Unruh develop a modest view of himself and also inspired him to greater attainments.

Although teaching had its trials, just as any other vocation, Unruh was grateful to the end of his days that God had given him the opportunity to be a teacher most of his life.

### A Partner for Life

After several years of teaching, during which he enjoyed the company of his loving mother, Abraham decided to do what the biblical writer had predicted long ago: "Therefore will a man leave father and mother and cleave to his wife." Apparently it all began at a church conference in the village of Spat. It was considered to be in bad taste in those days for young men and women to associate too freely with each other. Moreover, for a teacher it was doubly important that all things be done decently and in order. And so, as was frequently true in those days, young men looked at likely marriage prospects only from a safe distance.

Katharina Toews was the daughter of a fairly well-to-do family in Spat. The parents, as well as Katharina, belonged to the Mennonite Brethren Church. Abraham's eyes took special note of this young lady at this church convention. Of course, the fact that she often sang solo parts in the choir also helped to attract Unruh's attention. To add to the

excitement, he was invited for tea to the home of this girl's family. Abraham decided to strike while the iron was hot. He had the inward conviction before long that Katharina should become his bride. Evidently she had no difficulty in responding favorably to his invitation to go through life with him. Although the element of romance was not absent, they decided to build their marriage on their common Christian faith and on a covenant for life.

In the year 1900, when Abraham was 22, he had the joy of being united with Katharina in holy matrimony. Elder David Duerksen of Spat, one of Unruh's heroes of the faith, officiated at the wedding. His wedding sermon was based on Psalm 118:24. "This is the day which the Lord has made . . . ." Sixty years later they celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary.

Mrs. Unruh was richly endowed with gifts of the more practical sort and in this way helped to complement her husband, whose gifts lay in other areas. One of the trials of the early years of their marriage was the discovery that Mrs. Unruh suffered from tuberculosis, but God in his mercy healed her. The sorrows and the joys which they experienced together deepened their partnership.

As a result of his marriage, Abraham's mother, who had taken care of him for about five years, was relieved of her household duties. Abraham, however, made it very plain to her that both he and his bride—Tina—as he called her—would be happy to have her continue to stay with them if she so desired. It speaks well for the mother as well as for the newlyweds that, when mother did decide to stay, the relationship between them remained unstrained and pleasant. Mother remained with them until old age; Tina, her daughter-in-law, continued to care for her even when mother's health failed. For several years just before her death, Mother stayed with her daughter, Mrs. Cornelius Baerg, in Tiege; but the Unruhs kept up contact with her right up to the time she passed away. Unruh ventured to say that many of the blessings of God upon their marriage,

although undeserved, could be attributed to the noble way in which his wife had treated their aging mother.

A poignant and beautiful story illustrates Unruh's filial relationship with his mother. In the year of the great famine, 1922, Unruh lamented one morning that his mother in Tiege, in the Molotschna, did not have enough to eat. The Unruhs, who were then in Tschongraw in the Crimea, decided then and there that they must bring mother some flour. At great personal sacrifice they decided to bring her 20 pounds. Unruh took the train and made his way to the Molotschna. With him on the train happened to be a lady student of his from the Bible school at Tschongraw and another sister from the church, who was blind. The trip took some 10 to 12 hours, and Unruh entertained his travel companions with lively conversation. Some of the travellers had checked their baggage but Unruh clung to his flour for fear that it would disappear.

The train station where they got off was many miles from Tiege. Besides, they had a blind lady with them and Unruh felt responsible for her. They set out together on foot. When they came to the little Molotschna River they found the bridge knocked out. They finally found a long and strong board which reached across the stream. Together with his student, Unruh cautiously helped the blind lady cross the river on the plank with the flour strapped to his back. In one hand he carried his suitcase; with the other he guided the blind lady.

After six hours of walking they arrived at the home of the student who was with them on the train; here Unruh was given lodging for the night. The next day he walked on alone for another five miles bringing the gift of love to his mother.

In the fall of that same year Unruh got the sad news that his mother had died. He expressed his grief poignantly in the words: "Until this day I knew every day: I have a mother who is praying for me. Now I have no mother."

Married life began as a morning of fair promise. But many dark valleys were to come. Mercifully, these could not

be seen at the time; when they came, they were brighter because they could walk through them together. Even teaching became more enjoyable, now that they could share joys and sorrows with one another.

### Barwenkowo

After eight years in Menlertschik, a new field of activity opened up. At a music festival which Unruh attended, he attracted the attention of several leading men from Barwenkowo. They invited him to become their elementary school teacher. Eight years at Menlertschik had endeared Unruh to the villagers so they were sorry to discover that he was planning to leave. Nevertheless, the Unruhs felt it was God's will for them, so in 1903 they made their way north to Barwenkowo. Unruh admitted later that, on the day of departure, he was tempted to draw back. Then it was Tina who encouraged him, by reminding him that he had given his word and that he had to keep his promise.

Barwenkowo lay on the River Toretz, in the 'Gouvernement' of Charkow. It was not really a Mennonite center, but several Mennonite families lived in this Russian community. Business and industry had attracted enterprising Mennonites to the town.

The school building for the Mennonite children had not yet been constructed when the Unruhs arrived at their new field of activity. A factory owner and deacon of the Mennonite Brethren Church put rooms at the disposal of the school. For a time the Unruhs conducted a school in their own living quarters but this proved to be too great a strain on Mrs. Unruh. A building which served both school and church was constructed and Unruh continued teaching in elementary school.

Later a **Kommerzschule** was established at Barwekowo; here Unruh was appointed instructor in German and Religion. These schools were meant to be trade schools, where students who had completed their secondary education might acquire various skills. In reality they often turned out to be merely a continuation of the programme of

studies begun in secondary school. The **Kommerzschule** in Barwenkowo was operated by the Russians in cooperation with the Mennonites.

Abraham had received private tuition in his teaching subjects from his brother, Benjamin, who had studied for years in Basel and in other institutions. (Later, the University of Heidelberg honored Benjamin Unruh with a doctorate.) Abraham earned the required certificate to be German language teacher; he taught at Barwenkowo until he left for government service during the First World War.

Teaching at this more advanced school proved to be an education for Unruh as well as for his students. His colleagues were all men of considerable learning—some of them graduates of prestigious schools. At the head of the school stood a great Russian educator, Professor Baronoff. Every two weeks the faculty met under his leadership to discuss pedagogical questions. Baronoff was meticulous in his administration of the school and insisted that every instructor record in his classroom ledger the lessons taught and the assignments given. Although this involved some unnecessary paperwork, it was designed to curb sloppy teaching habits.

Associating with a faculty that had academic interests was exhilarating for Unruh. On the other hand, his Christian faith was now put to the test in new ways, for the **Kommerzschule** at Barwenkowo was not run on Mennonite principles. His colleagues were not Christians; also, the students engaged in practices which in Unruh's view could only lead to grief. Mennonite students attending the school obviously had to live up to the academic standards set by the school. What grieved Unruh was that they were also expected to conform to the school's social pattern, which included dancing. Upon Unruh's insistence, Mennonite students had to have parental permission to participate in school dances (and that was normally slow in coming). Out of respect for Unruh's stand, the Mennonite students refused to participate.

Unruh also protested against the flippant and casual use

of the name of the Deity in school dramas, for example. He realized, of course, that he could not expect non-Christian students to live up to his standards, but he fought for freedom of conscience for those who had had a Christian upbringing. In this and other ways he tried to witness for his Lord.

Shortly after the Unruhs arrived in Barwenkowo they suffered a severe test of faith. Their first child, two-year-old Elizabeth, was taken from them by death.

At first Unruh wondered (as most Christians do when things seem to go wrong) whether they had misunderstood the Lord by leaving Menlertschik. But the Lord showed him through this experience that God does not deal with us according to our transgressions, but that he chastises us as sons, and that even the tragic experiences of life have a redemptive purpose.

The Unruhs were privileged to have with them at the time of their grief Abraham's brother, Cornelius. Cornelius had just returned from his theological studies in Hamburg, where he had been living in preparation for mission work in India. He preached the funeral sermon on the text: "The Master is here, and calls you." What a comfort this message was to their broken hearts!

Several years later death struck a second time. Their four-year-old son, Cornelius, died of complications caused by goiter. As the body was about to be lowered into the ground, their oldest son Abram tried to stop the pall-bearers from putting his little brother in the grave. Father then explained to him that brother Cornelius would rise again some day. This satisfied young Abram and he stopped crying.

Later their oldest son, Abram, experienced tragedy. A boy threw a clod of earth at him and struck him in the eye. As a result, he lost the sight of one of his eyes. At 21, when he landed in Canada with his parents, the immigration authorities detained him for some time for fear that he had an eye disease. Finally they were convinced that the use of the eye had been lost through an accident.

In each experience of grief the family was sustained by the assurance of the unchanging love of God.

Shortly after the Unruhs moved to Barwenkowo, Russia became involved in a disastrous war with Japan (1904). Fires of revolution broke out again and again. Under the last Czar, Nicholaus II, a country tired of autocracy cried out for a constitutional monarchy. But it was slow in coming. Then came the horrors of World War I, the end of the Czarist regime and the Bolshevik Revolution.

In the second year of the war Unruh entered the Russian Red Cross. In time of peace all able-bodied Mennonite men under 45, whether married or not, had to give three years of service to the state. Most of them performed forestry service. With the outbreak of World War I new avenues of service opened up. Great numbers of Mennonite men served in the Russian Red Cross. As in time of peace, so also in war, their support came entirely from the Mennonite communities. Hundreds of thousands of rubles were spent by the Mennonites for the privilege of performing an alternative service, and in this way escaping military service.

Many of the Red Cross workers served in hospital trains and performed other emergency services. However, Unruh was asked to fill an office position. At first he was stationed at Jekatrinoslav (now Dnjepropetrowsk), but later was transferred to the Black Sea port of Odessa.

Because of Unruh's build, no uniform could be found that would fit him, and so he had to have one tailor made. The standard belts were too short also, and so two belts were sewed together and he was jokingly called the 'two-belt Sanitaeter'. His dignified appearance in uniform often overawed the humble Russian soldiers, who frequently saluted when they saw him; they thought he represented the top brass of the army.

In 1917, after two years of service, the Revolution had broken out and Unruh was free. With the return of the Russian soldiers to the port of Odessa, the situation for the Red Cross workers became very precarious. These sailors

felt they had borne the brunt of the war; they thought the Red Cross workers had enjoyed a soft life while they fought dangerous battles. They threatened to shoot the whole lot of them. Unruh then became the spokesman for his colleagues and in a public speech laid the facts before them, reporting on the sufferings and the dangers that a great many Red Cross workers had endured. The sailors were finally pacified, and Unruh returned home to his family. During the time he was away their son Heinrich was born.

At Barwenkowo anti-German feelings began to run high because of the presence of German troops in the area. As long as Unruh was away, engaged in essential service for the Russian government, the family was not molested. With the outbreak of the Revolution, however, all protective barriers were broken down. Barwenkowo was caught in the midst of the bitter conflict between the Red and the White armies. The situation became so dangerous that all the Mennonites fled the village, first by foot and then by wagon. They found temporary refuge on an estate owned by a Mennonite. During their absence the Russian villagers robbed the Unruh household. All of Unruh's papers and books were torn to shreds and thrown in a heap in the middle of the living room. It was a frightful experience during which they lost all their household goods. Fortunately their house was not burned to the ground, as was the case with others.

Upon their return to their devastated dwelling, they poked around in the debris. They found an envelope containing 100 rubles which the robbers had not noticed. It was Unruh's tithe money, which he had kept in one of his drawers. The first thought was to use it for the pressing needs of the moment. But upon further reflection, Unruh insisted that they give the money to the treasurer of the church; it had been given to the Lord. The treasurer of the church at first refused, for he knew about their desperate situation and how badly they needed it. Unruh insisted, however, and the money was given for the work of the Lord. In a marvelous way, their friends in Barwenkowo gave

them what they needed to begin housekeeping once more.

Unruh advised the members of the church not to take back their belongings by force, should they see them in the hands of their Russian neighbors. He also instructed his young boys that, should they see any of their property anywhere in the village, they were not to claim it. The Russian villagers had helped themselves quite freely to the Unruh boy's belongings, too, and so when one of the Unruh boys saw a Russian fellow wearing his clogs, he was greatly tempted to disobey his father's injunction. He dared not take them back because of father's command; so he let the fellow keep them but only after giving him a thorough trouncing.

The times were badly out of joint, and even though the Revolution opened up new opportunities for a witness among the Russians, the Unruhs began to feel uncomfortable living in Barwenkowo. Unruh had been released from government service in order to return to his teaching post at Barwenkowo. However, through the agonies of the war with Germany, many Russians developed an intense hatred for those whose mother-tongue was German. Unruh, who taught Russian students the German language, began to see the weather warnings and decided that it would be unwise to remain in a Russian community in such revolutionary times. It appeared to Unruh as if the Communists would take over Russia eventually, so they sold their house to a Russian buyer and prepared to leave for the Crimea.

Some of the instructors at the **Kommerzschule** were blatantly irreligious. Unruh cringed as he saw Mennonite students inhaling the atheistic air of the school. At that time, Unruh received a call to become the principal of the **Zentralschule** at Karassan, in the Crimea. This the family took to be the leading of the Lord and the Unruhs prepared to move back to the Crimea.

Shortly before they were to leave Barwenkowo, Mrs. Unruh became seriously ill. Indeed, she came very close to death. Unruh overheard his mother—who was still with

them—discuss with some neighbor ladies the grim prospect of the funeral. Both he and his beloved Tina cried to God for healing. They did not, however, want to force God's hand, so they agreed that they would pray for grace to become completely yielded to God's will; soon there came a turn for the better. Unruh received his wife back as a gift from the Lord.

### Karassan

Travel was not easy in those tumultuous years. Unruh hired a freight car and loaded all their earthly belongings into one end of the car. He arranged the other end as living quarters for the family. Here they slept, cooked, ate and whiled away the time as the train moved slowly south to the Crimean Peninsula.

Karassan was culturally one of the more important Mennonite centers in the Crimea. The church in Karassan was the oldest Mennonite Church in the Crimea. The large **Zentralschule** lay off the main thoroughfare in a large open square in the center of the village. Close by, surrounded by a park, was the large church building, stately in appearance and known for its excellent acoustics.

The Karassan **Zentralschule** had developed into a first-rate school. It continued to function as a Mennonite institution until the mid-twenties, when the Soviets took it over. To begin with it was a boys' school, but when the Unruhs came to Karassan in 1918, it was already co-educational. Not all the teachers of this school shared Unruh's religious convictions. Indeed, it is doubtful whether some of them were Christians at all. When Unruh's son, Abram, was converted, he felt constrained to go to the teachers of his school to apologize for some of his past misdemeanors. One teacher chased him out of the room.

There was one other Mennonite **Zentralschule** in the Crimea by now, the one at Spat. This was co-educational from the beginning; to the amazement of the prophets of doom it proved to be quite successful in spite of the presence of girls.

The first Sunday in Karassan, Unruh was invited by Elder Hermann Rempel of the Mennonite Church to preach the sermon. Rempel immediately sensed in Unruh a kindred spirit even though they did not belong to the same church. Frequently thereafter, Unruh and Rempel would go to neighboring villages to conduct preaching missions. Rempel had great conflicts in his life about the matter of the assurance of salvation. Once when he and Unruh were alone in a field they wrestled in prayer and confession. After this experience, Rempel began to minister with a confidence which he had lacked heretofore.

In his attempts to renew the spiritual life of the church, Rempel found strong resistance and seriously considered leaving the Mennonite Church. Unruh advised him to stay and to continue his labors. Having accepted ordination as elder, Unruh argued, he was obligated to remain with his flock. Rempel then withdrew as elder of the congregation, and having done that, he felt free to found a new church, called the "*Evangelische Bruedergemeinde*" (*Allianzgemeinde*), in 1921.

As a point of interest, Rempel called on Unruh and returned India missionary Johann Wiens, to help the group draw up a constitution for the new church. When they came to the article on baptism, they were told that their help would not be needed. This seemed unfair to some brethren, and so later they were called in to discuss baptism with the charter members of the new church. The new church practised immersion as its mode of baptism, and Unruh later spoke frequently at baptisms in this newly formed denomination. Rempel himself was later deported to Siberia for his Christian witness. He died there.

Unruh attended faithfully to his duties as principal and teacher. At the same time he felt drawn more and more into the preaching ministry. Although Mennonite ministers generally worked for a living with preaching as an unpaid avocation, Unruh had begun to feel that God was calling him away from general education to Bible teaching and the proclamation of the Good News.

After two years at Karassan, Unruh was called to join the faculty of the newly-founded Bible seminary at Tschongraw. He had for years been a serious student of the Word of God, and throughout his teaching career he had had many opportunities to preach the Gospel. Now a new door of ministry seemed to be opening up for him. Once again, the family prepared to move. It was to be their last move in Russia.

While at Karassan, their youngest daughter, Lydia, was born. The Unruhs now had four sons and two daughters.

Many events had led up to the new ministry at Tschongraw. But before we describe Unruh's ministry at Tschongraw we must look at some of the links in the chain of events that led Unruh to become a minister of the Gospel.

# 6

## PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS

"Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power".

### First Attempts

While still at Menlertschik, his first teaching post, Unruh had been called upon occasionally to preach in Mennonite churches. Since the teacher was usually better educated than the other villagers, it was only natural that he should be asked by the minister in charge to speak a word to the congregation from time to time.

Ever since his conversion Unruh had felt in his heart the desire to proclaim the Gospel, but he thought he was too young. Moreover, he knew nothing about homiletics. But he had learned through the writing of innumerable essays at school how to organize his thoughts around a theme. When he was 18, he visited relatives in one of the villages of the Crimea, and attended a church service with them. The minister called on Unruh to lead the Sunday morning prayer meeting. He read the Easter story and made a few comments. At lunch, the minister asked whether he would not give a message in the afternoon service. "But I have never preached," Unruh protested. He was encouraged by the minister with the assurance of divine help in such circumstances, so he quietly accepted the invitation. (Unruh admitted later one of his inherent weaknesses: he could not refuse invitations to speak.)

He lost his appetite for the noon meal. In mind he was rehearsing a sermon on Zacchaeus the Publican, which he had heard some time ago. He claimed his first sermon lasted exactly five minutes. Later, Unruh somewhat facetiously made a point of saying: "The short sermon got me into the ministry and the long one pushed me out."

From then on he was asked again and again to preach in his home village church, as well as elsewhere. His second sermon was preached before a larger audience in the village of Spat. His text was Romans 5. This second attempt evidently was less successful than the first, for he felt completely crushed after speaking. He accepted this apparent defeat as a lesson from the Lord, in which he was taught that preparation, gifts and enthusiasm are not quite enough for a successful ministry of the Word. Unless God supplies the grace of the Holy Spirit, one cannot effectively communicate the Gospel.

At Barwenkowo, the members of the Mennonite and the Mennonite Brethren churches got along so well that for 15 years they worshiped together. The break came when the Mennonite Brethren insisted on closed communion. Unruh always had mixed feelings about the manner in which the division of these two churches was brought about. Before the division he preached frequently before the joint congregation; later, he served the Mennonite Brethren.

Not only on Sunday mornings, but also on Sunday evenings, he would frequently be called up to proclaim the Word of God. This was a bit unusual, for Sunday evening services had not yet become a fixed custom among Mennonite church attendants in Russia.

The brethren soon saw that God had equipped their brother Unruh with the necessary gifts of grace to proclaim the good News, and so in 1904, a year after they arrived in Barwenkowo, Unruh was ordained as minister of the Gospel. Elder Abram Schellenberg, who had married brother and sister Unruh, also officiated at the ordination. The Unruhs received many guests and visitors into their home on this occasion. In fact, Mrs. Unruh was not able to

be present at the ordination service because of her heavy household responsibilities. Unruh, however, claimed that his wife had never, on account of her absence from the service, questioned his ordination.

### Ordained to the Ministry

At the suggestion of deacon G. P. Froese, a Mennonite industrialist, Unruh was eventually chosen to be the leader of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Barwenkowo. His well-prepared sermons attracted larger and larger audiences, and the membership of the church increased. His friendship with deacon Froese continued even into the new world, for they were to meet again in Canada under quite different circumstances.

Although preaching among the Russians was forbidden by law, Unruh could not resist the urge to share the Good News with the Russians. Under the Czarist regime, very severe penalties were handed out to all those who proselytized among the Russians; this practice maintained loyalty to the Orthodox Church. After the October Revolution of 1905, Unruh and his friend Gerhard Froese could not refuse the call to hold meetings among the Russians. Unruh feared trouble and for that reason wrote to the historian P. M. Friesen to ask him about the wisdom and legality of their efforts. Friesen answered: "Do you want to wait until it's legal?" And so they forged ahead. The reaction was not long in coming.

Unruh with his deacon friend Froese were caught preaching to the Russians and were arrested. The judge before whom they had to appear gave them a thirty-day jail sentence; in former times it might have meant exile to Siberia. His Russian friends put in a good word for them before the authorities and they were released after 20 days in jail.

After 1917, when the country began to fall apart, there was greater liberty in evangelism among the Russians, and many a Russian convert was added to the church of Jesus Christ. During World War I, while Unruh was stationed at

Jekatrinoslav and Odessa, he preached frequently to the Russians without interference from either religious or political authorities.

After Unruh was released from prison, he feared that he had jeopardized his teaching career by serving a prison term. Fortunately the Russian school inspector was Unruh's good friend; he saw to it that he got his teaching post back.

When the Russian school inspector heard that Unruh was contemplating leaving Barwenkowo, he did his best to deter him. He begged the Mennonites, finally, to find a replacement for Unruh who would be equally good. That was a tall order. In any event, the Unruhs felt that God was leading them back to the Crimea.

After they had settled in Karassan, the burden of preaching became even heavier, especially since Unruh was bearing two mantles: teaching and preaching. In spite of his brush with the law at Barwenkowo, Unruh did not cease from preaching to the Russians when the occasion was provided. At great risk he preached even to the Red soldiers when these began to invade the Mennonite villages.

Quite unexpectedly God gave him an opportunity to spend all his energy in preaching and Bible teaching. In 1920 he joined the faculty of the Tschongraw Bible School.

# 7

## TSCHONGRAW

"What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

### The Bible School Idea

The years 1918-1920, during which the Unruhs lived at Karassan, were eventful years in Russia. The developments in Petrograd and Moscow, as well as in other parts of the country, were to change drastically the course of Russian history, if not that of the world. By 1920, when the Unruhs left Karassan, the triumph of Bolshevism was certain. The new regime with its promises of 'peace, bread and freedom' had begun. For two years, beginning in 1918, bloody civil war raged all over the country. The triumph of communism brought the Russian people a new kind of autocracy which made the absolutism of the Czars pale into significance.

Although the Mennonites had developed a good elementary and secondary school system under the Czars, the thought of establishing a center for biblical studies did not mature until the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. There was a small Bible school in Friedensfeld, which functioned from 1907 to 1910. But apart from this small effort, no Bible training institutes were established in times of prosperity. During the revolution and the ensuing famine, three such schools came into being. In the years 1923-26 there was a small Bible school in Ufa, called the Mayak Bible School. Another was founded in Orenburg (1923-26).

In both of these schools Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren students studied together. Cornelius Unruh, Abraham's uncle, had for years begged the Mennonite Church for permission to establish a training school for preachers, but this hope was never fulfilled.

With the rise of the educational level of the Mennonites in Russia, many were no longer completely satisfied by the kind of sermons they heard on Sundays. Mennonite ministers were normally chosen from the ranks of the members of the church; many of them had no special training. Of course, a few went abroad to study theology. Then there were outstanding self-taught men, both teachers and farmers, who developed into great preachers. But Mennonite leaders in general did not view with favor the idea of a school of theology where Mennonite ministers might get their training. They guarded jealously the tradition of lay ministry, perhaps not realizing fully that the concept of a lay ministry in no way minimizes the importance of theological training. Of course, it was also true that the central government at St. Petersburg would have viewed with suspicion the establishment of such an institution.

For these and other reasons it was not until 1918, with the end of the former regime, that the green light was given for the establishment of the Bible school at Tschongraw, near the city of Simferopol, in the Crimea. The temporary military government of Wrangel authorized the opening of such a school.

### The Beginning

Among the missionaries to India from the Mennonite Brethren in South Russia was Johann G. Wiens. Having spent a term in India, he returned to the Crimea for furlough. The revolution ruled out any prospect of returning to India, and so Wiens had to find some means of earning his daily bread. Wiens had completed the seminary program at Hamburg, and had done additional work in London. Because of his superior theological training as well as his

experience in India, Wiens was called upon frequently to help ministers who had not had the advantage of formal theological training. Even in India, Wiens had served as a teacher to other missionaries. So frequently did he conduct minister's courses in different centers that these came to be known as 'wandering Bible schools'.

The request of Johann Siemens, a village school teacher, for more thorough instruction in the Scriptures became the occasion for the establishment of a more permanent school for the training of missionaries and ministers. The board which had supported the Wiens family in India encouraged Brother Wiens to offer instruction in languages and Bible to prospective missionary candidates. So an invitation to enrol in such classes—to be conducted at Tschongraw—went out to the Mennonite communities, and students began to apply for admission. The Mennonite periodical, **Die Friedensstimme**, carried the announcement all over Russia, and thirty-four students enrolled in the fall of 1918.

At the annual conference of Mennonite Brethren in the same year, Wiens laid this new venture before the delegates and received a sympathetic hearing. A second teacher was appointed to the faculty—H. J. Braun, who, like Wiens, had graduated from the Baptist seminary at Hamburg, Germany. The decision of the Mennonite Brethren conference to support the school had great publicity value. It was now not looked upon as a private, local or even provincial venture, but as a work of the whole Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia. Although the school was called a seminary to begin with, the more popular name was 'Bible school'.

Students came from all the Mennonite colonies in Russia, some from as far away as Siberia. Their educational background varied a great deal, so the first-year students were divided into lower and upper level classes. The course of studies took three years to complete.

While some financial support came from distant communities, the major responsibility in this regard fell on the Mennonite Brethren churches in the Crimea; indeed, most

of it rested on the villagers of Tschongraw. Many of these outdid themselves in kindness and hospitality. One family cleared out their summer kitchen and put it at the disposal of the school. Families took students into their homes as boarders.

Money was scarce in these difficult years, and the school was able to survive only because of the liberality of friends of the school. There were occasions when a whole wagon-load of produce arrive from some distant village, designated for the Bible school kitchen. Teachers, too, received their meagre wages in kind. They were allowed a certain amount of wheat per school year. To begin with, tuition for the school year was 40 pounds of wheat per student.

In 1918, the year in which the school opened its doors, the Crimea was cut off from the rest of Russia by the troops of the Central Powers, following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Then in 1919, General Wrangel, in a desperate effort to overthrow the Bolsheviks, gained control of the Crimea. But in 1920 he was completely overwhelmed by the Soviets. In the midst of this welter of revolution and war, God was building his Kingdom through the work of the Bible school.

### Unruh at Tschongraw

After the school opened its doors, Gerhard Reimer became the third member to be added to the teaching staff. Reimer had studied science at Kiev; he gave the students instruction in German and Music as well as in the basics of the natural sciences. The fourth faculty member to join the school was A. H. Unruh. Although Unruh had not received as much formal theological training as had Wiens and Braun, he had developed as an effective expositor of the Scriptures.

When the Unruhs moved to Tschongraw in 1920, the political horizon was dark. The Soviets had quite literally cleaned out all the granaries in the Mennonite villages so there was little seeding in the spring of 1921. Since 1921

was a dry year the spectre of famine began to stalk the Mennonite communities.

Quite providentially the Lord had supplied living quarters and some land for the Unruh family in advance of their coming to Tschongraw. Several years earlier, when the Unruhs were still in Barwenkowo, the villagers of Tschongraw got into a financial crisis. They were unable to meet the mortgage payments on their lands, so a delegation came to Barwenkowo to seek financial aid. Unruh urged some of the wealthier brethren to buy up some of the property. He himself felt it was his Christian duty to purchase a small farm. From the money realized through the sale of part of the village holdings, Tschongraw was able to pay the mortgages on the remaining properties. As a consequence the village remained in Mennonite hands and the Unruhs had a place to live (something they could not have anticipated when they decided to help Tschongraw out). Their boys were old enough by now to take care of some cattle and land. They lost all their cattle the first year, however, because crop failure resulted in complete lack of fodder. The economic situation was bad, but the school prospered and Unruh enjoyed his new field of activity.

The church building in Tschongraw, in which the classes were conducted, was attached to the village school. It had been built jointly by Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren; all villagers worshiped together on Sunday, regardless of church affiliation. The Lord's Supper, however, was celebrated separately. Although it in no way symbolized denominational warfare, by some strange coincidence the members of the Mennonite Brethren Church lived on one side of the village street and those of the Mennonite Church on the other.

Both men and women students were admitted to the Tschongraw school. Since only such students were accepted who had serious purpose, some pretty solid work could be done. When the new students arrived in fall, they would often give their testimonies in Tschongraw and neighboring villages. Frequently, following such confessions of faith,

members of the audience would seek conversion. Student groups would render programmes in the village churches; these proved to be a special attraction for the youth of the villages. During the Christmas and Easter recesses student teams were sent out to preach the Gospel and to carry their witness into the homes of the people.

The deep sense of calling and the heavy workload gave the school a serious appearance. Daily chapel exercises contributed further to the deepening of the students' faith and to their encouragement to live a God-pleasing life. Since co-education was still a bit novel in Mennonite circles, the students had to take extra precautions not to give occasion to misunderstanding or rumor. For this reason, dating was ruled out completely.

As yet there was no professional ministry among the Mennonites of Russia. This meant that the students could not look forward to a spiritual ministry which would provide them with a livelihood. Most of them returned to farming, teaching and other similar pursuits, but with a desire to serve the churches more effectively with the training they had received.

Through emigration to the Americas the blessings of Tschongraw overflowed to other lands as well. At the end of Unruh's first year at Tschongraw, the first class graduated from the three-year course of studies. It was a festive occasion. Visitors from many Mennonite communities had come for the graduation. Eight students had successfully completed their training. They returned to different parts of Russia to serve; some to suffer and some to die.

Basically, with some modifications, the curriculum was a duplicate of the Hamburg Baptist seminary. In their first year students were drilled in the German language, without which any kind of study was impossible. Unruh occasionally quoted his uncle Cornelius, who had often quipped: "The Devil is against grammar, for he knows that it only makes for a better understanding of the Scriptures." Old Testament History and Interpretation, Church History,

Bible Geography, and Homiletics were also offered during the first year. New Testament studies, Prophets, Bible Doctrine, Homiletics and more German language—as well as English and Russian grammar—were second year courses. Most of the same subjects were continued in the third year. Hymnody was part of the daily fare throughout the three years of study. As mentioned earlier, besides the language offerings, several other general knowledge subjects were taught. The academic year ran from September first to May first, following the pattern of the elementary and secondary schools.

The facilities of the school were very limited. Classes were conducted in the village church building. Library facilities were virtually non-existent. Professor Lindemann of Simferopol, who spent time in Tschongraw as plant scientist, repeatedly visited the school and sat in on the lectures. He advised the administration strongly to move the school to a center where students and staff could receive greater intellectual stimulation. He suggested Halbstadt or Ohrloff in the Molotschna. These were cultural centers at the time with many educators, medical doctors, ministers, libraries and even a publishing firm. Perhaps if the school had been able to continue, the advice would have been taken more seriously, for Lindemann's point was well taken. But the school had a tenuous existence from the outset and was closed by the Communists in 1924.

As a matter of interest, Professor Lindemann occasionally gave open lectures in evening sessions at Tschongraw. These proved to be very helpful to the hearers. Unruh apparently exercised a strong spiritual influence on Professor Lindemann. As a result, he accepted Christ as his Saviour in later life. His funeral was held in a Mennonite Brethren congregation.

### **End of a Noble Venture**

From its inception the school had been a thorn in the flesh for the Bolsheviks. When these revolutionaries gained control of the Crimea in 1920, all teachers and students of

the school were arrested and taken to the neighboring Russian village of Annovka for a court hearing. They were charged with having been in league with the White Army. When a commissar learned that there were 40 men and women from all over Russia in the school he feared the influence of such an institution. Actually the accusations were made by a follower of Machno, not by local Russian authorities.

Their Russian friends from Tschongraw, however, convinced the authorities that there was no foundation for the charges. To the contrary, they related incidents in which those connected with the school had been kind to them and helped them. And so, in a marvellous way, the Lord delivered them from imprisonment. This provided a breathing spell for the school, and instruction proceeded without interruption. In 1921 a Jewish commissar again made a serious effort to have the school closed, but through the providence of God, the school remained open.

The years 1921-22 were very trying years for another reason as well; it was a time of famine. The students established a communal kitchen. Everyone gave what food he had and shared it with the others, including those who had nothing. The Unruhs also shared with the students something of what they had. The hunger for bread, however, did not quench the hunger for the Word of God.

In 1920, the Mennonite Central Committee was born in America, and came to the aid of their brethren suffering in Russia. By 1923 the crisis appeared to be past, but in 1924, the teachers of the school were again haled before an angry people's court, where serious accusations were hurled against them. Unruh rose to the occasion as spokesman for his colleagues and clearly showed that all the charges were without foundation. Rational arguments, however, counted little in those days. Fortunately the presiding 'comrade' on this occasion was a sensible Russian teacher who finally dismissed the charges. The faculty was freed, but the school was closed.

Petitions were made to the central government in

Moscow, and the order came that the school was to be re-opened. At first the local authorities, in the hope of personal gain, asked the school to pay a fine, after which they would guarantee its freedom to operate. So the faithful believers of Tschongraw collected money and even wedding rings to enable the school to continue. However, the local authorities found ways and means to thwart the order from the central government; when the required sum was paid, the Communists, without compunction, broke their promise and closed the school again. Some 50 students enrolled at the time had their studies rudely interrupted; the closing of the school was like the funeral of a six-year-old child.

Several of the Bible school teachers continued to minister in the churches. Winds of spiritual revival were blowing here and there. As late as 1925, Johann Wiens, the principal, conducted a minister's course in Spat. But this freedom became the lull before the next storm. Soon the teaching of religion in all schools was banned. Many Mennonite teachers lost their jobs; others were arrested and jailed; some died in slave labor camps in Siberia.

Looking over the two centuries that Mennonites have been in Russia, Tschongraw was a light that burned only a short while before it was put out by the darkness. By the time Lenin's body rested in the mausoleum outside the Kremlin wall (1924), Stalin's star was rising. With an iron hand this dictator—assisted by a massive police organization—crushed all those liberties which Mennonites and others in Russia had so passionately hoped for. The kulaks were destroyed ruthlessly, and by the time collectivization was complete, 10 million lives had been sacrificed. Among them were thousands of faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Not until later did it become apparent that the Bible school in Tschongraw was the forerunner of the Winkler Bible School in Manitoba.



# 8

## CANADA AND NEW BEGINNINGS

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out. . . and he went out not knowing where he was to go"

### Escape to Freedom

The political situation had deteriorated steadily. While many Mennonites still hoped that better days would come soon, the Unruhs at last reached the conclusion that prospects for the return of freedom were rather bleak.

As late as 1922 Unruh still believed firmly that Russia had better days ahead. To illustrate: when one of the Tschongraw students, Cornelius Wall, sold what little he had and prepared to leave for America with his family, Unruh tried hard to discourage him from leaving. He was certain that times would improve. But the Walls felt God was leading them. For their silver wedding anniversary in the new world, Unruh wrote them that although he had discouraged them from emigrating at the time, he had admired their venture of faith, back in 1922. But by 1924 Unruh too had lost faith in a future in Russia.

Unruh had become fairly well known among government officials so he was often apprehensive about falling into the hands of angry men at any time. On a number of occasions he experienced God's miraculous intervention, but like David of old he feared that some day he would fall into the hands of Saul. Moreover, his oldest son, Abram, was planning secretly to escape across the border to Turkey; naturally father was concerned for his safety. A number of

Mennonite families had already left for America; so the Unruhs applied for passports and visas to emigrate to Canada. They had hoped, originally, to emigrate to the United States, but the door to that country was closed to them.

One day in Nebraska a former Tschongraw student who had emigrated to the States was asked by a kindly brother whether he could give him the name of some needy family in Russia whom he might be able to help. The student, Johann Siemens, immediately thought of A. H. Unruh, his respected teacher. It was a coincidence that Unruh's brother, Cornelius—a missionary to India serving with the Baptists—was on furlough in America when he heard that his brother wanted to leave Russia. He tried to solicit funds to provide passage for his brother and his family. A certain Mr. Peter Penner responded by lending the Unruhs one thousand dollars. Cornelius Unruh sent this money to Tschongraw in an envelope, and in some miraculous way it reached the Unruhs. Now they had money for their tickets. Once they had settled in Canada Brother Unruh, together with his family, repaid the entire amount.

It was not easy to acquire the necessary documents for emigration to Canada. Besides, Unruh dared not appear too often at public offices, lest he be apprehended by the authorities, so his son Abram did as much of the work as he could. The fact that Abram had spent a year in studies at Simferopol helped him to know his way around.

After many anxious days of delays and waiting, Mr. and Mrs. Unruh, with four sons and two daughters, left the Crimea for Moscow. Here they were detained for some time, because they had not yet received all their documents. They feared that their hopes to gain freedom might be dashed to the ground, as had been true in so many cases.

Professor Benjamin Unruh, one of A. H. Unruh's brothers, who had migrated to Germany some time earlier, was notified of the dilemma. Benjamin knew the Canadian consul in Riga, and used his influence to clear the way for the departure of the Unruh family. There was final

investigation by the Russian border-guards, then they said their last farewell to the land of their birth, a land which was dear to them. They took with them only a treasury of memories—mostly good, some painful—to the new land. One other Mennonite family travelled with them.

From Riga their travel took them to Germany, where brother Benjamin met the family. They had the privilege of hearing this learned theologian preach to them and the other Mennonite family as they gathered for a service of worship. Benjamin preached to the small congregation as if he were speaking to an audience of a thousand.

From Germany they went to Holland, where they enjoyed Dutch bread, milk and cheese. Finally, the C.P.R. passenger ship, the Minnedosa, left Antwerp. Soon they faced raging December storms on the high seas. The Atlantic churned so furiously that all the members of the Unruh family, with the exception of father, were laid low with sea sickness. In January, in the middle of a cold Canadian winter, their ship docked in St. John, New Brunswick.

The Unruhs arrived in Canada in January, 1925. By the fall of that same year the family had moved to Winkler. Here Brother Unruh rented two rooms in the home of Brother K. Warkentin and began a Bible teaching ministry. Unruh was not known for pushing himself forward; yet as one who had been called to the ministry, and was new in a strange land, he had taken courage to introduce himself to a circle of brethren. This led to the beginning of the Winkler Bible School.

In that first class, which he conducted in the fall of 1925, was Unruh's eldest son, Abram, and a young lady who later was to become his wife. Together they were to spend many years as missionaries in India.

The school at Winkler had an insignificant beginning. Only thirteen students enrolled; Unruh was a bit discouraged. One day a man met him on the street and asked him how the new school was coming along. Unruh confessed that he was a bit downhearted, since only thirteen had

enrolled. "Well," said the well-wisher, "that's one more than Jesus had." It was a word spoken in season, and Unruh took heart.

Till Christmas he taught alone, but after New Year one of his former colleagues from Tschongraw, Gerhard Reimer, joined him in his new venture. So they expanded the curriculum to two classes. Those students who had been enrolled in the fall now moved to the second level. The new students who came after the New Year made up the primary class.

By the fall of 1927 the former head of the Tschongraw school and Unruh's colleague, Johann G. Wiens, was ready to begin teaching at Winkler. It seemed remarkable that almost the entire staff of Tschongraw was transplanted to Winkler. One might add that the curriculum of Tschongraw (which was essentially Hamburg) was also transferred to the new world (minus the Russian language). Of course, an effort was made to carry over something of the spirit of Tschongraw as well. In any case, there was no great need to experiment with curriculum, for the three original staff members continued where they had left off in the Crimea.

There was already one Mennonite Bible school in operation in Canada at the time. At Herbert, Saskatchewan, Mr. W. Bestvater headed a growing Bible school. Unruh knew of this school and feared that he might come in for criticism if he established another school which could eventually run competition to Herbert. To avoid misunderstanding, he wrote to Bestvater to ask him how he felt about his aspirations for a school at Winkler. When Bestvater wrote that he would like to see such a school in every province, Unruh was completely at peace, and threw himself into his new ministry with great energy. It should be said here that Unruh was an ambassador of goodwill between the 'Russian' and 'Canadian' Mennonites.

Soon a plan to erect a school building stirred in his mind. The Mennonite Brethren Church of Winkler, however, was not ready to assume any financial responsibility for such a project. Nevertheless, permission was granted to solicit

financial help from anyone interested and able to contribute toward such a building. The Kroeker brothers, and others, gave their active support, and soon the building, which was to be known eventually as the Winkler Bible School, stood ready. The original name was 'Pniel', reminiscent of 'Penuel', where the patriarch Jacob met God face to face. As time went on, and the need grew, the original building was enlarged. (A completely new campus was constructed a few years ago.)

Commenting on the unpretentious beginnings of the Bible school in the periodical *Zeugnis der Schrift* published by the Herbert Bible School, Unruh wrote that one could legitimately call this insignificant institution a school, just as a babe in the cradle is a full-fledged human being. Using the same figure of speech, he went on to say that several ministers had visited the school, had looked into the cradle and rejoiced to see that the child was alive. No one had turned away from the babe in disgust because it was not a full-grown man as they might have expected it to be. They had noticed life in the child and life is always a miracle of God. A child must not be despised on the grounds that it is not a giant. The school by its purpose and program could never hope to become a giant, but it had hopes of performing an important ministry for the Canadian churches. Perhaps through the training of missionaries other lands might also get some of the overflow of blessing.

Unruh later admitted that one of the main functions of the school came to be that of preparing Sunday school teachers, which Mennonite Brethren churches at that time desperately needed. As the school sought to adapt to the Canadian situation, many curriculum changes were made. New faculty members were added from time to time and English was introduced as one of the two languages of instruction. Today, of course, all instruction is given in English.

For 19 years Unruh headed the Winkler Bible School which, by God's grace, was permitted to exert a positive influence on many Canadian Mennonite Brethren churches

as well as on other denominations. In the early years the school had no security other than its many friends. No conference stood behind it with financial guarantees. For this reason Unruh and his colleagues had to solicit much of the support themselves. This did not bother Unruh particularly, for he explained that he was begging for God, and he hoped that he, like the beggar in the Parable, would be carried to Abraham's bosom when he died.

He travelled from farm to farm soliciting financial support. One day as he walked along the street in Winkler somewhat lost in thought, he failed to take note of a Christian brother who had passed him on the sidewalk. It pained the brother that Unruh had not noticed him; smitten in conscience he explained: "Brother Unruh wouldn't look at me today because I have not yet given anything to the Bible school." So—instead of accusing Unruh for a failure in brotherly affection—he wrote out a check for the work of the school.

It is not necessary at this point to tell the story of the Winkler Bible School, which, in the providence of God, still continues its ministry. But the school does form an important chapter in the life of A. H. Unruh and is a monument to his vision and his efforts in Christian education.

# 9

## THE MENNONITE BRETHREN BIBLE COLLEGE

"I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known."

### The Birth of the College

For several decades the Canadian Mennonite Brethren churches had been blessed with Bible schools, which had sprung up in a number of provinces, from Ontario to British Columbia. With growing urbanization there came a general rise in the level of education among Canadian Mennonites and increasingly greater demands on the ministry. Also, with the growth of Bible schools, the problem of finding adequately trained teachers to staff these schools was becoming more acute. A number of men who felt called to the ministry of the Word of God were forced to go to non-Mennonite schools to get further training.

As early as 1939 the need for a school of higher theological education was expressed at the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference. In 1942 an Education Committee was elected, with instructions to make a feasibility study. This committee recommended that a beginning should be made by having one of the existing Bible schools add an advanced class to its curriculum until a suitable college building was found. Since for some years the Winkler Bible School had offered a fifth year of studies, and also because Dr. A. H. Unruh taught at Winkler, the committee recommended that a beginning be made at Winkler.

Eventually because Winnipeg was geographically more central and also had a large Mennonite Brethren community, the Education Committee came to the conviction that the new college should be established in Winnipeg. At the Canadian Conference, 1944, the delegates voted in favor of this recommendation. The conference then unanimously requested that Dr. Unruh assume the presidency. His keen interest in the life of the church, his highly respected ministry and his long experience in education made him the most suitable candidate.

### The College President

To be chosen president of the new college sounded honorable enough, but there was little to preside over. It was not easy for Unruh to think of severing his 19-year-old ties with the Winkler school and to launch a new venture at his age. He knew that his resignation from the Winkler school would be a set-back for the institution he had worked so hard to build up. Moreover, his colleagues at Winkler were loath to see him go. After much prayer and thought, however, Unruh became convinced that God was leading him to a new field of service.

The newly elected college board had found a suitable building on 77 Kelvin Street, Winnipeg, and in the fall of 1944 classes began. The large brick building had for years served as a public school. During World War II it had been taken over by the military. A thorough refurbishing of the interior was necessary and many kind-hearted men and women of the Winnipeg churches spent long hours cleaning and redecorating the old school building. Today the building is worth many times its original purchase price. Since 1944 a number of other buildings have been erected on the college campus. An addition to the Library Building, in which the college archives are also located, was appropriately called the "Unruh Memorial Building," in honor of the founder and first president of the college.

In spite of the fact that the delegates at the Canadian Conference had voted overwhelmingly in favor of establish-

ing the college, the school had some difficulty in finding general acceptance throughout the Brotherhood. One reason, no doubt, was the long tradition of lay leadership in Mennonite Brethren churches. Hand in hand with this went a kind of suspicion of higher theological education. No one doubted that to be a high school or university teacher, or to be a medical doctor, one needed many years of training. But was this necessary for the ministry? How could a man combine 'simplicity in Christ' with advanced theological training? Moreover, some feared that in a few years there would be such an over-production of ministers that the church could not use them. Added to all this, there was an underlying resentment on the part of the Bible schools. They sensed they were now to be regarded as schools working at a lower level than the college. What helped the college to weather many of those early storms was the deep confidence of the brotherhood in Dr. Unruh.

### The First Year

Student enrolment at the college in the first year of its operation was small; critics were quick to see the incongruity between a large academic building and a handful of students. Unruh answered the charge by pointing to the much greater incongruity in the creation of the world; God had made a world of enormous size but initially put only two people into it. God expected growth in population and so did the college. Some of the classes that first year were taught in the evenings to enable those who worked during the day to avail themselves of the opportunity of studying the Scriptures and related subjects.

Unruh knew from long experience that biblical-theological studies cannot be carried on fruitfully in isolation from other academic disciplines. Students must have a foundation in general knowledge on which to build. It is for this reason that seminaries in America normally require graduation from university as the minimal entrance requirement. Unruh realized that the Canadian brotherhood was not ready to operate at that level, but he felt that college

students should have at least a high school education. At this point several of the Bible school teachers protested. They insisted that only Bible school graduates should be admitted to college classes. Unruh, however, felt this was unreasonable, for he hoped that many might come to college—especially older students and ministers—who could not be asked to go through the Bible school stream first.

But Unruh hoped that the students coming to college would have not only the necessary academic preparation but also the spiritual qualifications. And what held for students applied to teachers in an even greater degree. An academically well-qualified teaching staff was hard to get during the 1940's, since there were relatively few men in the Canadian brotherhood who had pursued advanced studies at seminaries or divinity schools. In any case, as Unruh saw it, the spiritual outlook of the college instructors was of greater importance than academic degrees. Also, he was concerned that all college teachers be in agreement with the Mennonite Brethren confession of faith, for he had observed in Russia that men who studied at Basel, Hamburg, Dorpat or Berlin wanted to fly the colors of these schools; this tended to cause disunity.

Although it was necessary to solicit teaching help from outside the Mennonite Brethren community for the first academic year, the young institution was spared theological controversy. Evidently Elder J. J. Thiessen, Saskatoon, had written to Unruh and asked him whether Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites might not carry 'the ark of the Lord' together in the matter of college education, but Unruh responded by expressing concern about who would drive the oxen which pulled the cart.

The closing exercises, held at the end of the first year of classes, attracted a great crowd of people. Brother C. C. Peters, who attended these exercises, wrote with great exuberance about the magnificent future he saw for the college.

By the end of the first year, however, Unruh realized that the school needed a president who could relate more

effectively to the English-speaking members of the Mennonite Brethren churches. For this reason, he asked the college board to release him from his administrative duties and to appoint John B. Toews as president. Unruh had begun to learn English in Russia. On the train from Montreal to Winnipeg, after their arrival in Canada, he conversed with English-speaking fellow-travellers. He realized that his English was very poor, but he argued that if he had to listen to the poor German he so often heard, there was no reason why others could not listen to his bad English. He compared the man who knew but one language with a car that had only one headlight. Nevertheless, as president of a college it was necessary to be more fluent in English for the sake of public relations, and so the leadership of the college was entrusted to John B. Toews.

Unruh, however, continued as professor of biblical studies for another ten years. In more ways than one, he may be called the 'father' of the college. At the age of 76 he retired from his active teaching ministry.



## **Part II**

### **Portraits of A. H. Unruh**



# 10

## I TOO AM A MAN

"By the grace of God I am what I am."

Abraham Unruh—like all men, both great and small—had both strengths and weaknesses. If this were not the case, we would hardly be encouraged by his example. It was because Elijah was a man such as we are, that James can hold him up as an example to those who pray.

We recognize, of course, that any effort to draw a portrait of another person can at best give us an approximation of what the person really is. Paul, who had a profound understanding of human nature, insists that no man can truly know what goes on inside another person except the spirit of the person himself (1 Cor. 2). We do not dispute that. On the other hand, no man can remain completely hidden, for by his appearance, his speech, his work, as well as in other ways, a man makes himself known to others.

We are also aware of the fact that every person looks at the other through his own eyes, and the pictures we get of other people do not always match perfectly. Much depends on the perspective from which one looks.

### As Others Saw Him

Anyone who saw Unruh for the first time was struck by his physique. He was quite literally head and shoulders above other men. His physical dimensions, coupled with a dignified bearing, gave him a patriarchal appearance. He

carried somewhat more weight with him than necessary, but in his day that was not yet considered to be as much of a problem as it is in our weight-conscious society. Perhaps with a bit of daily exercise he would have been somewhat sturdier on his legs; however, he did a fair amount of walking since he did not own a car. Until later in life, when he was bothered with diabetes, Unruh enjoyed a healthy appetite for food.

To keep his legs from getting over-tired, he did much of his classroom teaching seated on a chair. Those of us whom nature has endowed with only scanty padding for our bones may develop 'weaver's bottom' if we sit too long on our chair, but Unruh did not suffer from this weakness. On one occasion when he was offered a cushion for his chair, he declined on the grounds that the dear Lord had given him the gift of a reasonably well-rounded posterior.

Most of us, I suppose, would have thought it out of character had we seen Unruh playing a game of volleyball or swimming at the Y. When he wanted relaxation he chatted with his neighbors. Although he took his boys swimming or fishing when they were young, he was not really an out-of-doors man. Inside, he could enjoy a game of dominoes or some game of chance with his family. Upon occasion he would take his children to see a good film, although he was generally against the movie industry. He found college socials—at which students sometimes outdid themselves in putting on humorous skits—quite delightful; he could enjoy innocent nonsense.

What always impressed his students was his physical endurance. He could work long hours and yet never seemed to leave the impression that he was tired. Often he would work until three and four in the morning. Rarely did Unruh miss an engagement because of illness. And even when he did occasionally run a temperature, he would continue to lecture with the sweat running down his face.

That is not to say that he was reckless with his health. Normally when travelling by train he took a lower berth. Once, when B. B. Janz sat up in a train coach all night,

while Unruh rested in a sleeping car, Janz somewhat self-righteously informed him in the morning that he saved the Lord's money by travelling coach. Unruh responded, with a twinkle in his eye: "And I saved the Lord's servant." In his old age Unruh also travelled coach, but that was because he found it more comfortable to remain in his seat than to try to squeeze into a narrow berth.

Unruh was rather helpless when it came to finding directions. He often lost his way in the city. For years he was uncertain of finding Eatons, even if he took the downtown bus which stopped at Eatons. When his eyesight deteriorated, matters got even worse. Friends once met him on the sidewalk and asked him where he was going. He confessed that he was lost and that he had prayed for someone to come and to guide him home. As long as his eyesight was good, he was guided by certain landmarks rather than by names of streets and numbers. Once when he returned to the city of Winnipeg and caught sight of the brewery near Redwood Bridge, he exclaimed with relief: "Now I feel at home again." (His friends couldn't possibly have read a double meaning into that comment.)

With the onset of old age Unruh developed some serious physical weaknesses. His diabetes caused him no little trouble and concern. The greatest burden in old age, however, was the gradual loss of his eyesight. Although he carried on his studies and his preaching ministry valiantly with limited eyesight, at eighty-two he was totally blind and walked about with a white cane.

Perhaps because he had never participated in sports or engaged very much in physical labor, he was physically not too well coordinated. Those responsibilities in the home which demanded some degree of physical dexterity were conveniently left to his wife. She was physically energetic and wiry and could handle a snowshovel as well as any man. The neighbors on Cobourg Avenue, where the Unruhs lived in Winnipeg, recount with delight the drama which the Unruhs staged when they put up storm windows in fall—one of those necessary evils caused by Manitoba's

weather. Mrs. Unruh was up on the ladder removing screens, cleaning windows and putting on the storm windows, while the doctor of divinity stood on the ground watching. Abraham was content to hold the ladder while dear Tina took care of the rest. But they got along famously.

On one occasion when Unruh lectured at Tabor College, an interested friend asked him about his wife. Well, she had to stay home and fix the pig pen to keep their pigs from getting away. When asked why he had not repaired the fence before he left, he confessed that this would be of no avail, since pigs had it in for him.

One should not get the impression, however, that Unruh lived in a dreamworld or that he had no practical sense about him. For example, one day he walked along the street of Barwenkowo and saw a wagon with horses standing close to the mill. On the wagon sat a little Russian girl. Suddenly the driverless horses began to run with the helpless girl still on the wagon. Unruh ran with the wagon to the limit of his strength and managed to snatch one of the reins, thus averting disaster.

In the matter of dress Unruh was somewhat fastidious. Apparently he had no casual clothes, for he never appeared in public other than in a suit. Few people outside the household ever saw him in shirt-sleeves. Even if one visited him in his home, he would put on his jacket before he sat down to chat. He was extremely conservative in the way he dressed. Although he did not wear expensive clothes and often wore his suits to a frazzle, he dressed well for a man of his means. It would be hard to imagine Unruh in bluejeans and turtleneck sweater, fitting as these may be for others. On one occasion during his last year of teaching, Mrs. Unruh had failed to look her husband over before he left the house and he appeared at college without a tie. The bell rang before he discovered his neglect, and so quite cheerfully he made his way to the classroom, remarking to the writer, in passing, "Heute bin ich Altkolonier" (Today I am an Old Colonist).

His neatly trimmed beard and mustache linked him to a former generation. (In Russia the beard and the mustache were frequently symbols of dignity—if not of pride.) Previous to his coming to Canada he had a rather full beard, but as it got more silvery he wore it fairly short. It added to his patriarchal appearance. As far as is known, he never offended anyone by his beard and mustache. He did, however, criticize those who neglected to shave—especially if they insisted on the brotherly kiss. Unruh explained that he had had enough of these scratchy stubblefields in Russia. Indeed, on one occasion when an elderly brother offered him a kiss, he stretched out his hand and responded: “Brother —, in America we greet each other with the handshake.” He frequented the barbershop regularly and kept his hair trimmed fairly short on the sides. When, however, he began shaking his bushy head as he preached or lectured with great intensity, he had difficulty keeping his hair out of his eyes.

No man is responsible for his physical endowments, nor can he take credit for them. How one relates to other people, however, is perhaps not determined so much by heredity as by a person’s upbringing, his values and by the grace of God. Unruh was known for his gracious dealings with his fellowmen. Although he had to oppose some brethren publicly when they expressed views which he thought were not correct or helpful, he never permitted such differences to create personal animosities. In his preaching and teaching he often expressed himself very strongly on certain issues, but after the thunder and lightning there was always encouragement and hope.

Like other men in his position, Unruh got his share of criticism—sometimes publicly, sometimes through anonymous letters. But he had an amazing capacity to forgive and to forget. It often surprised people when Unruh was asked for a recommendation, that he would recommend someone who at some earlier occasion had criticized him publicly. He never seemed to carry any grudges. When at a church business meeting or conference some brother was

cut down, Unruh usually came to his aid, in order to redeem him. At one Canadian conference the representative of Tabor College was severely criticized by B. B. Janz for some of the problems at Tabor. Unruh came to his defence, and lively debate between him and Janz developed. Janz, in conclusion, expressed the hope that Unruh would not remember their quarrel when he came to preach his funeral sermon. Unruh responded by suggesting that should Janz preach at his funeral, he might choose for his theme: "God who justifies the ungodly."

Whenever Unruh felt that he had wounded someone, he was quick to make amends. This was brought home to the writer in a very touching way by an incident that occurred at the diamond wedding anniversary of the Unruhs. At the reception following the service, the writer with many others wished brother and sister Unruh well. Because of his bad eyesight Unruh failed to recognize all his friends immediately—something everyone understood perfectly well. Several weeks later, after the Unruhs had gone to British Columbia, Unruh wrote the writer a personal letter with his own hand (not easy to read, for Unruh was by then almost completely blind), in which he apologized profusely for the lack of warmth in his greeting, for he had not immediately recognized the voice and was fearful lest this should be interpreted as a failure in friendship.

At his funeral several of the speakers made a point of underscoring the grace of brotherliness which Unruh had manifested in his long life of service. Once when he was rudely attacked and criticized, he shared with another brother his great fear that he might forsake his first love for the brother. At conferences he entered freely into debates; he could be quite adamant in his views but he usually wound up asking for forgiveness. Once, when a granddaughter visited the Unruhs in Winnipeg, and stayed longer than anticipated, he was concerned that she get to her boarding place in safety. After she had left he called the number and asked if she had already arrived. The answer was an abrupt No! After a while he tried again. This time

he was told in no uncertain terms to stop bothering people at night. To his deep dismay he discovered that he had called the wrong party. Next day his friend H. P. Toews visited him. Unruh shared his embarrassing experience with him and asked him to go with him to the people whom he had disturbed the previous night. So together they made their humble apologies; Unruh was able to be at peace again.

What made association with Unruh so delightful was the fact that, with all his serious concerns, he had remained so human.

In the early years of the College when President J. B. Toews was anxious to cover the agenda for the faculty meetings, Unruh would at times spice the deliberations with such humorous anecdotes that they just could not move ahead. On one occasion Toews begged Unruh to tell his stories at some other time. He excused himself, saying that it was 4:30 p.m. and he had held back all day, and so he should not be blamed for indulging in a bit of humor after so much repression.

He was a good conversationalist and quickly brought a meeting of friends to life by his spirited conversation and pleasant banter. Nephews and nieces always thrilled when they heard that Uncle Abraham was coming for a visit. Not only was he a brisk talker; he was also a good listener—he could even listen to other preacher's sermons. And he was a questioner. He paid his associates the high respect of asking them for their view on certain issues or for their understanding of some passage of Scripture.

Whereas he took seriously Paul's word of caution to Timothy: "Bodily exercise profits but little," he also took the following admonition seriously: "But exercise yourself in godliness." This did not mean that Unruh had accepted a form of godliness which lacked life and freshness. His was not a brittle legalism, but a piety of the heart. Unruh had a tender conscience, informed by the Spirit of God and the Scriptures. This, however, did not make him morbidly introspective. On the contrary, he constantly looked beyond

himself to the needs of others and to tasks that were bigger than his personal problems. Although upon occasion he would share his inner burdens and conflicts with others, he had the grace to keep the irritations of daily life to himself. He made no secret of it that he had to struggle, like the rest of us, with weaknesses of the flesh and the attacks of the Evil One. But he did not find it particularly edifying to lay bare his inner problems in public. There was a certain holy reserve about him, which came from a life which was "hidden with Christ in God." On many occasions in his life God led him through deep waters, but he kept his equilibrium, even when he was completely crushed. The secret of this strength was obviously his deep sense of the presence of God.

Unruh expressed his views on a great variety of topics in his sermons and in his writings. These form a kind of index of his character. We now want to select a few areas of thought on which he expressed himself. In this way we hope to see more clearly the measure of the man.

### As He Saw It

One sin which frightened him more than many others was the sin of self-righteousness. In private and in public, from lectern and pulpit, he spoke against Pharisaism. He went so far so to warn young believers about joining a church where pride and self-righteousness were at home. They would be better off, he suggested, to join a church that was enduring a measure of suffering because of her faith and life. This attitude can be understood better against the background of life in the Mennonite communities in Russia. Many followers of Menno Simons lived according to a rigid moral code, thinking that if they moved within an accepted legal framework they were acceptable to God; indeed, his favorites. When Unruh expounded Galatians, for example, one always had the impression that he was interpreting Paul's message against the background of Mennonite legalism, rather than the legalism of Judaism. Unruh, too,

had his ethical do's and don't's, but in his case they were rather an expression of a living faith.

There were those in Mennonite circles, especially in Unruh's younger years, who thought it was blasphemous to claim that a person could know that he had eternal life. It was argued one could never be certain here in this life. For Unruh, however, the assurance of sonship was one of the most precious truths that he had discovered. He, too, had hoped that by moral attainment he would be accepted by God, but that hope had turned out to be vain. His hope was only in God's grace. This made him humble and flexible—to the point where others accused him of compromise. One of his spiritual mentors—who had taught him to magnify the grace of God—was C. H. Spurgeon, whose writings he had thoroughly assimilated, even though he rejected some of Spurgeon's Calvinism.

Although the message of God's free grace was one of his favorite themes, Unruh was well-acquainted with the early history of the Mennonite Brethren and knew therefore where a lopsided emphasis of a biblical truth might lead. The liberty which the Lutheran evangelist Wuest had proclaimed in the Mennonite churches, and which found such a ready response among those who were tired of wearing the yoke of legalism, was misconstrued as license by some Mennonite Brethren groups. This was always a source of embarrassment to Unruh, so he made sure that his message of 'grace alone' was coupled with a deep ethical concern. He frequently quoted his brother Benjamin, who insisted that both grace **and** truth had come to us through Jesus Christ: "Grace without truth," Benjamin had said, "was too soft; truth without grace was too hard."

In the matter of ethics Unruh shared the basic convictions of most Mennonite Brethren in his day. The Mennonite Brethren Church had been founded as a protest against some of the unethical practices in the Mennonite communities in Russia. Drinking, smoking and gambling—to mention but a few items—were out as far as Unruh's understanding of the Christian life was concerned. Of

course, Unruh did not believe that by refraining from several vices one exhausted the ethical demands of the New Testament, or that one could make oneself more presentable to God by laying aside some bad habits. He said quite freely that greed was a more serious violation of Christian ethics than smoking. In a day when the use of lipstick by some of the ladies in the church was considered a serious violation of Christian ethics—even to the point of denunciations from the pulpit—Unruh reminded his brethren that slander was a much more serious ‘sin of the lips’.

Unruh was genuinely concerned about pleasing God and living without offence before men. On minor issues he took a mediating position, but when he saw important ethical principles violated he would take a strong stand. In the matter of sex-morality he drew a clear line. Although he had a deep appreciation for humor, he never stood for shady jokes. While serving in Odessa during the war a secretary in his office once shared a questionable story with him. Unruh raised his strong voice, called her down and sent her out of the office, to the consternation of his associates. He was very critical of teen-age dating, and although he encouraged a healthy freedom between the sexes, he disapproved of the familiarities which created potential moral dangers. At the risk of misconstruing Paul, he thought that in this matter the apostle’s word was apropos: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” As might be expected, he was very critical of immodest dress, although he recognized, as he put it, that dress styles are not necessarily an indication of the morals of an individual.

Worldliness, as he saw it, went much deeper than such external matters as dress. In a sermon on this topic he touched upon such things as cultural ideals which tend to blunt a believer’s conscience. He warned against materialism as another form of worldliness, but also against the dangers inherent in the field of aesthetics and fine arts. He had grave concerns about the indiscriminate way in which many church members participated in the entertainment world. He had nothing against active participation in recreational

activities, but since so many of these brought believers into close contact with worldly people he felt that such things as bowling, playing pool, baseball, football and hockey could easily become worldly activities. In this respect we might be inclined to judge him as narrow, but since many people in the church felt strongly about such things at the time, he knew that those who indulged in them would offend others. That, for Unruh, was a very serious matter.

In a study of I Cor. 8-10, he suggested the following guidelines for believers in their relationship to the world: (a) everything that harms body or soul (b) everything that is clearly wrong (c) everything that is questionable (d) everything that offends (e) everything that helps to confuse the line between the church and the world (f) everything that the world would be surprised to see believers do (g) everything that is not in harmony with the Scriptures—is to be repudiated. Although he was not governed by so-called 'church rules', he felt that they were very helpful for young Christians who entered the fellowship of the church. For that reason he was in favor of clearly setting a pattern for Christian living so that the church might be unified not only in doctrine but also in ethics.

Piety for Unruh, however, was expressed not only in a repudiation of worldly practices or the participation in religious exercises, but in down-to-earth honesty and goodness. It meant keeping promises which had been made; it meant paying debts; it meant keeping appointments; it meant helping others in need. Frequently in his sermons he stressed the need for simplicity in Christ. To walk humbly before one's God, as the prophet Micah wrote, was for Unruh the very essence of genuine godliness. He often quoted his missionary brother, Cornelius, who had made the observation that God's grace was very 'one-sided'; it could be received only from beneath, not from the top or from the side. In other words, "God gives grace to the humble."

Although he strove for spiritual perfection, he made full allowance for human frailty, and so one could not really call

him a perfectionist. He suggested that the confession of the apostle James, "For we all make many mistakes," should be heard often in our public prayers, in sermons and in personal testimonies. A Winnipeg family felt led to move to British Columbia, and told Unruh that they had come to the conviction that it was God's will. Unruh responded: "Well, that's good; and should you discover that you made a mistake, you can always move back." Perhaps a bit too human for some, but quite realistic!

Unruh's piety had an air of freshness about it. It was unaffected. He did not want to parade godliness. He was critical of those brethren who were so legalistic that they had to pray audibly and in a standing position—to show that they were Mennonite Brethren. Some carried this form of godliness to such lengths that even in a crowded railway station they would rise and pray audibly before they had a bite to eat. He chided his self-righteous brethren for despising those who sat for prayer or who prayed silently. He criticized his brethren for having done away with memorized prayers, for now they were memorizing their own—and they were much poorer than the former. In his radio addresses he always wrote out his prayers and read them to his audience. He was careful in the observance of the Lord's day, but not in a pharisaical way. Once when a brother did some necessary work on Sunday and excused himself by a reference to the words of Jesus about the donkey that fell into the well on the Sabbath, Unruh commented: "Good enough!" "But," he added, "if the donkey falls in every Sunday, perhaps you should sell the donkey."

For himself and for others he held up high standards of Christian deportment. One lady who joined the Mennonite Brethren Church later in life confessed that she had not joined earlier because she knew she could never live up to what Unruh preached. One hopes she did not join because she saw the standards being lowered.

The secret of much of Unruh's strength in his spiritual life lay in his consistent devotional exercises. Whether at

home or travelling on trains, he made it a habit to feast daily on the Word of God and to exercise himself in prayer. He confessed with the biblical writer: "All my springs are in Thee."



# 11

## FAMILY LIFE

"Here am I, and the children God has given me"

### The Children

Unruh and his wife, Tina, believed that children were a gift of God, so they rejoiced at the blessings of family life. The Lord gave them five sons and three daughters. One son and one daughter died in infancy. The Unruhs arrived in Canada with six children (Abram, the oldest, was twenty-one; Lydia, the youngest, was six). Although father conducted daily morning devotions with his family and played with his children occasionally, much of his time at home was spent in his study. As one can imagine, much of the responsibility for bringing up the children fell on Mrs. Unruh. In addition, she had a deep appreciation for her husband's ministry and was a constant source of strength and encouragement to him.

Since Unruh had to be away from home so often—sometimes for long periods of time—Mrs. Unruh had extra burdens to bear. Like other immigrants from Russia, the Unruhs had to count their pennies; consequently it took some ingenuity to feed a large family with only a meagre income.

Perhaps a greater concern than food and drink was the parents' desire that their children be brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. The Unruh children were full of imagination, so the little town of Winkler occasionally seemed too small for their boundless energy. Like other

young fellows, the Unruh boys at times embarrassed their parents with their pranks. Unruh often expressed concern that the deportment of his children should invalidate the Gospel which he preached. He rarely showed his frustrations outwardly. However, on one occasion he admitted to a class in Bible School that his boys had got into serious mischief and that he did not have the heart to teach that day.

Shortly after their eldest son, Abram, was born, the little fellow became desperately ill. It was a severe trial for the parents, and they begged God fervently to restore him. When Abram became well again, they dedicated him to God and to His service. Although they never told him about this, secretly they hoped and prayed that this consecration might be realized in his life. It was a great joy, therefore, for the parents when the A. A. Unruhs left in 1936 for India to serve as missionaries.

The Unruhs were also delighted when their eldest daughter Katharine became the wife of A. H. Redekopp, a minister of the Gospel who also taught in Bible schools. Redekopp admired his father-in-law greatly, and Unruh loved his son-in-law. Redekopp's early death threw the Unruhs into deep grief.

Their younger daughter, Lydia, was married to Mr. Nick Friesen, of Chilliwack. After several years of happy married life, Friesen was tragically killed in an auto accident. Again God's comfort sustained them in this dark moment, though the grief was great.

The Unruh's youngest son, Victor, lost his life overseas during World War II. This experience was probably one of the most painful events of their family life. For some time previous to Victor's death, Unruh was deeply troubled about the spiritual welfare of his son. One morning he told Mrs. Unruh that the Lord had appeared to him at night and had given him the assurance that their son would live. It was not clear to him, however, whether this meant that he would come home alive or whether this meant eternal life. Shortly after this, they received the sad news that Victor

was missing. After the war, the bereaved parents were greatly comforted by a message brought to them by one of Victor's friends. He told them that when Victor boarded his plane for the last time, he made his friend promise that should he not return he would tell his parents that Victor died with the assurance of eternal life.

Their son John with his family lives in Toronto. Son Henry and his family live in British Columbia, where Henry carries on his medical practice.

### In Sickness and in Health

The Unruhs generally enjoyed good health, although Mrs. Unruh was seriously ill on several occasions in the earlier years of their marriage. With the onset of old age, physical disabilities became more acute. Mrs. Unruh came close to death's door several times. Once she suffered a serious attack of meningitis. Her son Henry, a medical doctor who came to her aid, had little hope for her recovery. Brother Unruh, however, gave himself incessantly to prayer for her restoration; as so often in their long life, the Lord answered and restored her to perfect health once more.

Once when she lay in the hospital with a broken arm, her husband — now without the careful watch of his wife — was brought into the same hospital with broken ribs from a fall down the stairs. In 1945, Unruh became seriously ill, but through good medical care and the grace of God he was able to overcome his physical malady. In 1958 he had to submit to surgery, but again the Lord restored him.

The most serious illness, which plagued him during his last years and ultimately led to his death, was diabetes. His eyesight also deteriorated so badly that he was forced to spend his last days on earth in physical darkness.

### The Mercies of God

When the Unruhs came to Canada in 1925 they could look back on twenty-five years of married life. They had lived through the most progressive period of the Mennonite

sojourn in Russia. They had also experienced the tragedy of a world war—during which the father and husband was absent from home for long stretches of time. Together they had endured the terrors of the Bolshevik Revolution. All their married life Unruh had been a teacher and preacher; they had shared together the triumphs and defeats that come to all public servants. They had wept at the grave-side of loved ones, they had been side by side through sickness and tragedy. Their first twenty-five eventful years always remained a most treasured chapter in their life. Although they did not forget to recount the mercies of God on their 25th anniversary, there were no great celebrations; for this was their first year in the new land of Canada.

The second twenty-five years of their life together were lived on Canadian soil under entirely new conditions. But God helped them to adjust, to adapt and to pioneer. On August 19, 1950, they celebrated their golden wedding-anniversary. The Winnipeg South End Mennonite Brethren Church could hardly contain the hundreds of friends who had come to share the occasion with them. The brethren G. D. Huebert and D. K. Duerksen spoke. Duerksen was of the North End church, where the Unruhs were members, and was a nephew of the Elder David Duerksen who, fifty years earlier, had married the Unruhs. After these ministers had rehearsed some of the blessings of God in and through the life of the Uhruh family, Unruh also chimed in with an elaboration of the motto: "The Lord is merciful and gracious. . . abounding in steadfast love." Members of the family took the theme even farther, as they testified in word and song of the blessings that had flowed to them from their parents. Dr. Henry Unruh, one of their sons, portrayed in a very delightful way the virtues of their mother. It was quite a surprise when an announcement was made that Unruh's brother, Dr. Benjamin Unruh, Germany, would now speak. Mr. C. F. Klassen had unexpectedly sent a taped message of Professor Unruh as a

surprise greeting for his brother's golden anniversary. It was a moving experience.

On the same day a host of friends gathered to commemorate Unruh's fifty-five years of service in the Mennonite community. Mr. J. H. Quiring, instructor at the Bible College, spoke for the college faculty. Then some twelve former students of Unruh expressed their gratitude for what Dr. Unruh had meant to them. Besides the verbal eulogies, many congratulatory messages had come by letter and telegraph. It was no small mercy for Unruh to have been in the public ministry for so long a time and yet to be held in such high respect by the many congregations which he had served. Although the Unruhs were now past the seventy mark, they had remained young in spirit as well as loving and humble.

Another ten years went by only too quickly and the evening shadows began to lengthen. In 1960, Unruh attended the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren for the last time. He had made it a point of always being present. On their way home, the Unruhs stopped in Winnipeg to celebrate their diamond wedding anniversary. For 16 years they had been members of the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church, and out of gratitude for Dr. Unruh's years of service to the church in the preaching ministry, Elmwood asked the Unruhs to celebrate this memorable occasion in their home church.

He raised the question: What have we learned since our golden wedding anniversary? Then he gave several answers. One lesson they had to learn afresh, he stressed, was that they could live only by God's forgiving grace. We are learning, he reiterated, to seek God's forgiveness for all the mistakes we have made in our married life. The Devil has a way of reminding the believer of his past, said Unruh, and such temptations must be overcome. Occasionally the Spirit of God lays his finger on past mistakes, added Unruh, and then it is so important that we learn to claim the grace of forgiveness.

In old age, he went on to say, our human frailties become

more obvious, so we must learn to forgive one another. Our 'old man', as Paul calls our sinful self, is just as old as we are. "For eighty-two years I have lived with my 'old man', and he has his quirks. How we need God's grace in our old age to cope with our own and one another's weaknesses! How our children need God's grace!"

We have learned, remarked Unruh, to be grateful for all of God's gifts: vocation, strength, opportunities. And, he added, we hope with the Psalmist, to "bring forth fruit in old age." Our life's work is done, but we would so much like to bear fruits of the Spirit to the enrichment of others. They often received visitors in their home, said Unruh, and how they wished that they could share some spiritual gift with the friends that came to them. Some years before Unruh had given a public lecture on the topic: "Our Spiritual Poverty at Our Social Gatherings." He wanted to practice even in old age what he had preached in his younger years.

At the end of his testimony Unruh became very personal. He felt that the diamond of the anniversary really was the church's love for them. "I have lived in Manitoba for a long time, and you have had the grace to forgive old Unruh all his errors." In his closing prayer he asked God to forgive where they had failed in the course of their long ministry. His last sentence was so indicative of the fundamental theme of his proclamation: "Go with us, Lord, because of Thy grace."

The reception in the lower auditorium of the church followed. Many of the visiting friends gave brief words of greeting, to which Unruh responded appropriately. This was August 13. The following day the Unruhs attended a meeting of former Winkler Bible School students, then made their journey to Chilliwack, B.C., where they spent the evening of their life.

## 12

### CALLED OF GOD

"I have worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me"

#### The Student

Although Unruh had received a good foundation in several disciplines in the Molotschna schools, he recognized that his schooling was not complete when he put his Russian teacher's certificate into his bag. The desire to learn never left him. He kept on reading and asking questions until his ripe old age. Besides private tuition and several special courses which he took after he had received teacher training, Unruh was largely self-educated. Among the Russian Mennonites, who were not as degree-conscious as some of their Canadian and American brothers, a man was more readily valued by what he could produce than by the academic degrees he could flourish. It was not unusual, then, to find here and there among the Mennonites some outstanding self-taught men. Unruh was one of them.

He spoke German perfectly, Russian fluently, and read and conversed in English (although he rarely preached in English). This linguistic competence opened up a world of literature to him. Since most of the significant theological works in Unruh's day were to be found either in German or English, he had access to much of what was available in theology. While in Russia, of course, most of his theological reading was done in German. Some of the English works which he read in his earlier years were in German translations.

One serious handicap which Unruh sensed rather keenly as an expositor of the Scriptures, was his lack of competence in the use of the biblical languages. He had not had the opportunity to attend a theological seminary. To obtain a seminary education, Mennonite students in Russia had to go abroad; that was a costly venture for a man with a family. For this reason Unruh spoke of himself as a lay preacher. By the use of critical commentaries, however, and by inquiring of those who knew Greek and Hebrew, he tried to overcome this handicap. The writer remembers with amusement travelling from Winnipeg to Ontario to conduct a Bible conference with Unruh. After sitting up all night in a train coach, trying to sleep, Unruh awakened his sleepy fellow-traveller early in the morning with the familiar question: "Brother Ewert, what does the Greek text say . . .?" What kept Unruh from basing theological points on one particular translation of the original text was his use of numerous Bible translations. Not only did he make liberal use of the Russian and English Bible, but he kept several German translations at hand, even though he always preached from Luther's version.

When Unruh taught at the college, he constantly encouraged his younger colleagues to further their formal education. He regretted that not more of them exposed themselves to both American and European theological learning. He wanted the college faculty to reflect not only depth but breadth of theological thinking. At times, when college teachers were criticized in their striving for higher education, he defended them, and insisted that learning as such was in no way detrimental to one's spiritual life.

Unruh was an admirer of Spurgeon, who also lacked a formal theological education. Like Spurgeon, he read avidly. What surprised many was Unruh's appreciation for authors of very different persuasions. He detested fixed, logic-tight systems of theology into which all biblical texts had to fit. Of course, he too had his pre-suppositions, but he was always fearful to make a text say what it did not. At times he did give a biblical text a wrong slant, but he did

this in good faith; when he discovered his error he willingly changed. But it also disturbed him when other teachers and ministers went beyond what was written. On one occasion a distinguished preacher informed the Elmwood congregation that Paul had written the Epistle to the Hebrews, as they would all discover when they got to heaven. Although it was an insignificant point, Unruh was upset, and later commented: "My! What a mouthful!" Like the bee that gathers nectar from many different meadows, Unruh learned from authors that differed widely in their theological orientation.

One of his favorite German expositors was the evangelical Lutheran, Adolf Schlatter. Schlatter's New Testament commentaries were never far away when Unruh worked through a biblical passage.

In his unsophisticated piety and his deeply evangelical position, Unruh made generous use of books that had a liberal orientation. Occasionally he even quoted such authors with approval in his sermons and lectures. But since most people did not know these writers, it was safe to mention them. No one got upset, for example, when Unruh shared an insight he had gained from Weizaecker, a German rationalist. Unruh did not reject a book outright simply because the author had some unorthodox views. Rather, he learned from him what he could, let the ideas filter through his own mind; only then did he express the ideas to others. In one of his lectures on Emil Brunner he said, "We must appreciate many of the things Brunner taught, but there are a number of points on which we beg to differ with him."

He read not only books but journals as well, in order to keep abreast with some of the currents of thought in theology. It is interesting to discover among his notes lectures on Brunner, Barth, and other thinkers in that category. Although he had no elaborate filing system, he had a way of keeping tab on his materials. Often he spoke of the different drawers of the mind in which students might collect and store away valuable information. Quite in

keeping with his European training, he stressed constantly the need for the memorization of important data. "You must hear a word at least six times," he would tell his students, "before you can expect to remember it."

Unruh had a high regard for the integrity and authority of the Scriptures. Fortunately he never became embroiled in the fundamentalist-liberal controversy which was raging in America when the Unruhs came to Canada. Unruh was not a polemicist and certainly not a heresy-hunter. He never looked upon the Bible as a book that needed to be defended; he excelled rather in proclaiming its message. He was convinced the Bible could stand on its own feet and that its message was self-authenticating. Once when he was asked about the problem of 'Balaam's ass', he responded by quipping: "I have no difficulty believing that the ass actually spoke, since I myself have heard many asses speak."

As a student of theology he remained very decidedly a practical theologian. Theology, if it was to mean anything, had to be preached. But it also had to be lived. Unruh's studies were not carried on in a cold, professional way, but with a listening ear—to discover what God was saying to him personally.

Of course, Unruh's studies were not limited to theology. He dabbled in the field of literature, history, biography and other areas. His **opus magnum** with which he concluded his literary activities was a history of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

When the Unruhs came to Canada in 1925, there was no thought of pursuing formal studies here in the new world. The concern for daily bread for the large family weighed heavily upon him. With the opening of the Winkler Bible School this concern was not immediately taken care of, for the school had a very tenous existence in its earlier stages. Even after it was well-established, the salaries were too meagre to allow for further studies. Unruh did take an English course at Bethel College one summer. Although his pronunciation left much to be desired, he had a remarkably

good English vocabulary, and often surprised students when he gave them the correct English equivalent for some German word. After a short term at Tabor College, Tabor granted him a Bachelor of Theology degree. In 1938, Bethel College honored him with a 'Doctor of Divinity' (*honoris causa*). One is tempted to speculate on what Unruh might have accomplished had he earned a doctorate through many years of formal training. Perhaps he would have been less popular. In any case, he bore his title with grace and humility.

Unruh's children learned to respect their father's study. Father for them was a man of the study. Although he was not a particularly early riser, he often studied in to the wee hours of the morning. He would admonish his students occasionally that without burning midnight oil they could not hope to achieve in life. Students and parishioners enjoyed the benefits of these studies when he spoke. As one might have guessed, it is difficult to sketch a portrait of Unruh as student in isolation from his other activities, for the connection between the study and the pulpit was very vital—to say nothing of the classroom.

Since Unruh learned so much from others, he felt duty-bound to share his insights with others. Jokingly he would tell his associates that most of his knowledge would be useless in the other world anyway, so he may as well share it here on earth. In a more serious tone he added a rider: "One truth which I have proclaimed all my life, I will continue to proclaim in the next: 'Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us for God with Thy blood'."

### The Educator

As a pedagogue Unruh was and remained European. His teacher training in Russia and many years of experience in the classroom had formed his teaching methods. Although many of the Mennonite teachers in Russia insisted on a kind of Prussian discipline in their relation to the students, Unruh with Christian charity and humility was not authoritarian in his approach. In Canada his teaching

methods naturally changed considerably from those which were familiar to him from the Mennonite school system in Russia. Here he taught only in Bible school and college, and the students in these institutions were usually much more mature. He always looked upon these students as men and women, refusing to call them by their first name. As may be expected, students observed a respectful distance between themselves and Unruh, and never indulged in unseemly familiarity. On the other hand, they knew that they could go to him at any time with their spiritual needs and find in him a friend who would listen to their problems and try to help them.

Unruh recognized quickly that European pedagogues had forgotten the student in their concern for subject matter. But he also had reservations about the opposite extreme which prevailed in America, where the teacher tried so hard to identify with the student that he failed to pull him up to a higher level.

In class Unruh used mainly the lecture method. Since he had considerable oratorical skill and loved the subjects he taught, students normally sat with rapt attention. There was a certain freshness about Unruh's lectures, which cannot be explained in any other way than to view them as a charismatic endowment. So absorbed did Unruh become in his subject that at times he completely missed the bell, holding his class through the intermission. When he expounded the Scriptures the students often felt like the disciples of Emmaus, who confessed: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scriptures to us?" Unruh always prepared his class lectures carefully. He argued—using an agricultural figure—that the fanning mill always made more noise when it ran empty, than when filled with grain. Taking notes from him was not easy, however. He made little use of the blackboard or other teaching aids—he depended on straight oral communication. But, with a rich supply of illustrative material and plenty of wit, the lecture hours slipped by rather quickly, as a rule.

Since he lectured in German, and German textbooks

were often hard to get, Unruh gave his students a great amount of mimeographed material. Later in life, when the question of copyright came up on various occasions, he admitted that he had some qualms of conscience about taking so much material directly from books. He made no money on the mimeographed notes, and he normally acknowledged the source of materials, but was not altogether certain that he followed proper procedure. Plagiarism is not always easy to define, and most of us must confess that we live by borrowed light. Unruh would have been the first to admit this.

Always he seemed to have the spiritual welfare of the student in mind. Even though he expected the student to master a body of facts, in class the emphasis lay on the broadening of the student's horizons and the deepening of his Christian commitment. It was hard for Unruh to keep lectern and pulpit separate. Many of his lectures could be called sermons; in the same way, because of their strong doctrinal content some of his sermons could have been called lectures. Whether the subject was historical, theological or practical, his ethical concern usually came through somehow. He often got so carried away with his subject matter, that he rarely covered everything that he had intended or promised to cover in one semester. A typical comment in the last lecture of the course would be: "Well, the remaining topics you may do on your own, in preparation for the exam."

His exams were usually quite objective and factual; ordinarily, students with average intelligence could score well unless they had altogether failed to prepare themselves. What made some of Unruh's classes easier was his practice of giving the students lengthy lists of review questions. If they knew the answers to these, they could be sure to do well on the final exam.

In Canada the question of student discipline was never very acute for Unruh; most students in Bible school and college were of the more serious type. Between classes, as might be expected, things got somewhat out of hand

occasionally. One day some of the fellows in Bible school got a bit rowdy during the intermission; suddenly Unruh stood at the door watching them. With a smile on his face he remarked: "Well, brethren, pray for the spirit of caution; our school desks are not that strong." No more needed to be said. He expected students to attend class regularly. A college student once missed his class because of a dental appointment. Unruh met him later and asked him where he had been. The reply was: "I had to have a wisdom tooth pulled." In utter dismay Unruh responded: "Whatever are you going to do now?"

In his relations with his fellow teachers Unruh was exemplary. Since he stood head and shoulders above most of them, they admired him, although some had to wrestle with envy and jealousy. Unruh treated his colleagues, both young and old, with respect and dignity. When he noticed that he had erred, he was quick to apologize.

He was keenly aware of the fact that some of his former students had lost their spiritual bearings. Attendance at Bible school or college was no guarantee against bungling. Critics of such schools are quick to point to such failures, with the insinuation that the school is to blame. Obviously, Unruh felt deeply sorry when any one of his former students became wayward, but to his critics he would say: "If you judge an apple tree by the bad apples lying on the ground, you will never gain a proper appreciation for the apple tree." One had to look at the good apples on the tree to learn to know the worth of the tree.

On one occasion during a theological consultation several of his former students disagreed with him and plainly told him that he had not been able to convince them of his position while they were under his teaching. After a moment of silence he said: "The pity with you men is that you are babies that the nurse dropped when you were little, like Mephibosheth in the Old Testament, and now you are lame theologians. I hope you will grow up."

For years Unruh wrote Sunday school lessons for use in Mennonite Brethren churches. But he also tried hard to

equip his students to present Sunday school lessons with some effectiveness. For years he taught pedagogy classes in Bible school and also supervised the student practice teaching. Many amusing incidents took place when these so-called 'trial lessons' were given. One student was nonplussed when he found himself before a class which he was to teach that he forgot everything he wanted to say, except his text: "I am the good shepherd." After repeating this beautiful saying of our Lord several times, Unruh kindly asked him to take his seat, adding humorously that he was a sheep, not a good shepherd. It was all done in good spirit.

On one occasion when he had lectured for a term at Tabor College, and was ready to leave for home, he made the rounds in the men's quarters where he had stayed to wish them well. Then rather shy and withdrawn, Waldo Hiebert felt sure that he would pay no attention to him. But to his amazement he put his arms around him and hugged him—a gesture of love that made an indelible impression on the young man.

Unruh loved young people, and right up to his old age they called on him again and again to give them lectures on various topics. He was concerned that the generation gap be made as small as possible. He never forgot the help he received as a young school teacher from the older and more experienced masters who took an interest in him. Young people, he thought, cheated themselves by refusing to associate with older people. On one occasion when he conducted a preaching mission in a small country church in Alberta, the leading minister had some difficulty in getting the services to begin on time because Unruh insisted on conversing with the teen-age boys on the church yard. In this way he not only showed his interest in them, but he also got them to listen to the sermon. He appreciated the idealism of the young folk; and saw in this a source of great strength for the church. But he also warned against that perfectionist attitude which younger folk tend to display, for example, when they insist on finding a perfect church.

Since such a church is nowhere to be found in this world, they hang loose all their life. He also protested strongly against the dichotomy between the local congregation and the invisible Body of Christ. Loyalty to the church of Jesus Christ made no sense, unless one expressed one's loyalty to a local community of saints.

To be an educator one must keep on learning, and must encourage others to learn. Unruh did both. He felt that deep religious aspirations did not militate against the quest for higher education. Nor did piety, in his view, make a person an enemy of culture. He himself encouraged participation in music and literary activities. For theological studies he recommended a broad general education. In his efforts to spell out what he considered to be a viable college curriculum, Unruh stressed again and again the need to combine the study of the liberal arts with that of theology. He cautioned young people against going to university immediately after high school. They should be encouraged to attend a school where academic pursuits and a serious study of the Scriptures could be combined.

He recognized, however, that any amount of formal education was insufficient to be successful in one's calling, if one ceased from learning. In one of his farewell addresses to college graduates, he warned them not to go into the churches under the illusion that they were now filled up and that all they needed to do henceforth was to pour out their knowledge on their audiences. First, he advised them, they should integrate what they had learned at college. Then, they should keep on stocking their minds with fresh reserves, so that they might be spared the fate of poor Lazarus, who had to live from the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Above all, they should avoid riding hobby horses. Whatever else they did, they should not give their congregations straw to eat—rather, they should give them nourishing grain.

Using an illustration from the kitchen, he told ministers that it was not enough to have a well equipped kitchen, one must also have food stored in the cupboard, if one wished to

prepare a good meal. Therefore, he encouraged them to keep on studying so that when they were called upon to prepare the spiritual bread for the congregation, they might have materials to work with. In this respect Unruh set a fine example himself.

### The Preacher

If there was one area in which Unruh excelled more than in others, it was in preaching. In our day preaching is often lightly regarded, although one suspects that it is 'poor preaching' that people are critical of, rather than preaching as such. In Unruh's day preaching was held in high repute. Perhaps it was men like Unruh who had invested preaching with such dignity. God had endowed man richly with gifts of verbal communication. Through hard work and practice he 'stirred up' the gift that was in him. His initial attempts at preaching were faltering enough, but the brethren who heard him saw in him great potential. He himself later warned congregations not to cut off a rooster's head (i.e. young preacher's) immediately, just because he had not yet learned to crow well.

In order to communicate a message Unruh knew that one had to speak in a manner people could follow. He stressed that a preacher should not only be understood, but he should speak so as not to be misunderstood. For this reason he disciplined himself in the use of flawless German. Moreover, he kept his vocabulary at a more popular level, for he recognized that one does not need long words to express profound thoughts. Indeed, the test of clarity of thought is often to be found in the ability to express one's ideas simply. He suggested that the fulness of the Spirit in a preacher may be detected when he is able to express clearly and intelligently whatever he has to say. "Lord give me enough understanding to speak intelligently," was a prayer Unruh prayed often. He realized that the invention of the microphone covered some of the preacher's vocal weaknesses, but he stressed the need for voice culture also, in order to communicate more effectively.

He had learned in school that the secret of a good composition lies largely in its organization and structure. This held for the sermon, too. For this reason Unruh made a point of structuring his sermons carefully. His hearers were never left in doubt about the topic under discussion. Generally, he had several main points which brought out different aspects of the theme. These main points were often developed by breaking them down further into sub-points.

Admittedly, the style of his outlines was a bit ponderous at times, but one could always follow with ease. Students would at times take the liberty of using Unruh's outlines in their own attempts to sermonize, but generally found Saul's armor a bit too heavy. Unruh, however, had no objections if they wanted to make a vest of his coat.

On one occasion a student had taken one of Unruh's sermon outlines and preached a sermon on it. A few weeks later Dr. Unruh preached in the same church, using the same outline. When the student discovered this later he was embarrassed and came to Brother Unruh to confess his plagiarism. Unruh responded: "One can dip deeply or shallow out of the same well."

Unruh took his preaching ministry very seriously. Indeed, it was this deep sense of divine calling that sustained him throughout his long ministry. Moreover, he realized that if his words were to carry weight, he must back them up with a holy life. How concerned he was, many times, that after preaching to others he might himself become disqualified by his own failures! He admonished fellow preachers to prepare their sermons with the prayer in their hearts: "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears." He recognized, too, that intelligence, learning, practice, and native ability in themselves did not guarantee good preaching. For without a spiritual enablement—a divine charisma—all human effort was in vain. To define this kind of spiritual equipment is difficult, but people tend to recognize its presence or absence.

However, lest any one think that Unruh trusted in God's Spirit to inspire him only after he stepped into the pulpit, it

must be stressed that Unruh prepared his sermons very carefully. It is true, he appeared at times to speak extemporaneously, but he really had prepared all his materials in advance. Some of our older readers may be surprised to learn that Unruh wrote out most of his sermons word for word. And, as he got older, he prepared even more carefully than when he was younger. One need only look into Unruh's hand-written sermons in the archives of the Mennonite Brethren College to convince oneself of the enormous energy that Unruh poured into his sermons. At times people would say to Unruh: "You simply shake these things out of your sleeves." To which he would reply: "What one shakes out of the sleeves (*Aermel*) is pretty poor (*aermlich*)"—the pun is lost in English. His son Abram remembers vividly those Saturday nights when father was simply not available; he often worked far into the night in preparation for a Sunday sermon.

Although his sermons were always built around clearly-defined topics, they were rarely 'topical' in the sense that homiletics use this term. His sermons were mainly textual. When a fellow preacher complained that he had such difficulty choosing texts for his sermons, Unruh responded: "That's not my problem. My problem is that so many texts stare at me and beg: 'Take me!'." He was able to file his sermons according to the order of the biblical books, for he always expounded some biblical passage in his sermons.

Textual sermons are the kind in which the basic materials of the sermon are dug out of a passage of Scripture. The theme is not 'created' but 'discovered' in the text. The sermon outline is an explanation of the biblical paragraph under study. Exegesis, said Unruh, gave life to the sermon. But the forerunner of 'practical exegesis' is 'historical', i.e., the careful study of the text in its context. Moreover, this kind of preaching gives the sermon much more authority, for the preacher is simply saying in his way—with contemporary language—what the Biblical author said long ago.

Although Unruh often wrote his sermons out, he did not take the manuscript with him into the pulpit. All he had in the pulpit was a skeleton outline. Perhaps one reason he objected to the reading of sermons was that it reminded him of his younger years when Mennonite preachers read from old sermon books. Moreover, many Mennonite Brethren had come to think that the Spirit was not free to work, if the minister used notes. And so Unruh left his notes at home. Whereas in his younger years it was not necessary for him to memorize in detail what he had written in preparation, because of his great ability to recall, in his later years he often memorized his written sermons. When his eyesight failed, Mrs. Unruh had to read some passages to him over and over again, so that he might fix them firmly in his memory.

He spoke some strong words to fellow ministers about the need for writing out their sermons. It would keep them from getting side-tracked. Also, it was a great help for the ordering of their thoughts. Moreover, it would serve to improve their grammar and vocabulary. It would improve the structure of the sermon as well. Above all, the writing out of the sermon was an excellent means of educating oneself. To extemporize on a skeleton outline alone meant to content oneself with the shell and not the real content of the sermon. A written manuscript sermon was a safeguard against saying foolish things, for which he would later be criticized. Indeed, to have real freedom in pulpit delivery one had to prepare the sermon carefully and in detail.

Unruh wanted his sermons to build up the congregation; for that reason they had to have content. For him they had to be instructive and informative. But that does not mean his sermons were stuffy, for his interpretations of the Scriptures usually turned into a strong appeal directed at the hearts of his listeners. At times he cut deeply into people's consciences; then again, he would put the balm of Gilead on troubled souls. In every sermon there were bound to be several crescendoes, which made the listener's spine tingle. And when he noticed that the boys in the balcony

were not listening he might turn to them and address them directly: "Boys, this is God's Word; take it seriously." And they listened. His manner of preaching among the Russians earned him the nickname 'the Hammer' (and that was before the days of the 'Hammer and Sickle'). And yet he warned preachers against appealing to the nervous system of the hearers. Much rather should they seek to touch their conscience. When Professor Lindemann of Moscow University (later of Simferopol) heard Unruh preach on one occasion, he was so overwhelmed with his oratory that he expressed his great admiration for Unruh's gift of speech. Unruh responded humbly: "I hope you are also impressed with my Savior."

Unruh was a master in the art of illustration. Since his audiences were largely rural folk, he kept his illustrations close to the soil. He compared illustrations to flowers which had been grown not in foreign lands but on home soil. At the same time he pointed out that the beautiful flowers on the table are no substitute for the meal that one eats at the table. He felt that illustrations, among other things, gave the hearers a pause in which to relax. Their primary purpose, of course, was to 'illustrate'. They were the windows of the sermon-house, not the foundations nor the walls—indeed if there were too many windows and a lack of solid walls the house was very shaky. Many of his illustrations were original, in the sense that they came out of Unruh's own observations. Not infrequently, however, one would hear him say "Spurgeon has said."

His extensive reading in German and Russian literature supplied him with another rich source from which to draw his illustrations. He could put a folk-tale or fable to good effect in illuminating some biblical truth. Since he was a man of the classroom all his life, many of his anecdotes and stories were taken from this area of life. An observant eye, a good memory, and a sense of humor kept his well of illustrations from running dry. He rarely took an illustration from his personal or family life. One should not, of course, understand the word 'illustration' in a narrow sense,

for with the use of picture language Unruh could illustrate a biblical truth without telling a story. Unruh confessed that in his use of illustrations he imitated Spurgeon, who said that he "dragged them in from anywhere by their hair." This was said to stress the need to use diverse sources for illustrations and not to suggest that they were artificial or forced.

Unruh was not primarily an evangelist, as some think of evangelists, and yet there was a strong evangelistic note in his preaching. When still in Russia he did considerable evangelistic preaching among the Russians. Often when he preached in Mennonite churches there were conversions. Perhaps God had equipped him more for the upbuilding of the believers, but the invitation for the unbelieving to come to the Savior was also given frequently. He felt that evangelism was of the very essence of the church and he advised converts to join a church which was concerned about winning the lost.

As a kind of prince among preachers he frequently had the opportunity to address fellow ministers at minister's courses and conferences. His understanding of the preacher's task can be seen from some of the things he suggested to his colleagues in the work. He warned younger men not even to entertain the thought of becoming preachers unless they had experienced a genuine conversion. Also, they should aim to be their true selves and not try to mimick others, although they should be quick to learn from older and experienced men. He cautioned them against listening to too many private confessions of sin. Above all, they should guard against the sin of pride.

The middle-aged ministers, he thought, were in danger of riding hobby horses, and of resting on their laurels. Also, they should guard against complaining about material needs, and they should not let envy and jealousy choke their spiritual life.

Older ministers, he observed, were in danger of speaking too often of their past accomplishments and of being too wordy. If they had given up their study habits, then

obviously they could not help but repeat themselves constantly.

In general, he warned ministers againsts spending their energies in defending or advocating small causes and small ideas, or to waste their time with trivia. He himself never looked upon the pulpit as the place to propagate one's pet theories or views. Preaching was not religious propaganda, nor was it for the display of rhetorical skills or academic learning. Through prayer and repentance preachers must keep their heart with all diligence, in order to be useful channels for the water of life.

For himself he often expressed the wish that his hearers would glean at least one thought from his sermon, which they might integrate into their life. In his less optimistic moments he hoped that even if they should forget everything he had said in his sermons, they might remember the texts which he had expounded. Since he moved about from church to church he would occasionally repeat his sermons. Only after they had lost fire, he argued, did they deserve to be thrown into the fire. By an oversight it could happen that he preached the same sermon to the same congregation after an interval of some years. However, that did not disturb Unruh, for, as he said, he trusted in the forgetfulness of his hearers. In general, however, his motto was: "Sing unto the Lord a new song."

Through his preaching, his teaching, his writing, and his active participation in the work of the Mennonite Brethren in America and in other lands, Unruh became what one might call a Mennonite Brethren statesman.



# 13

## MENNONITE BRETHREN STATESMAN

"For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God"

### Itinerant Expositor

There is probably no man who influenced the Canadian Mennonite brotherhood as profoundly as did A. H. Unruh. For a period of some 25 years he was known far and wide in Mennonite churches in both Canada and the United States. Our American brethren got the impression that the theology of all Canadian Mennonite Brethren was that of Abraham Unruh.

His travels in the churches of Manitoba began when the Winkler Bible School was founded. In an effort to create interest and to solicit funds for the operation of the school, Unruh had to be on the road rather frequently. His expositions of the Scriptures probably did more to gain the confidence of people in the Bible School than did his reports on the school. As he became known in the churches, he was invited as guest preacher again and again. From Manitoba word of his ministry spread to other provinces and soon he was ministering in churches far from home. Since the Bible school year was only six months long, Unruh would often travel for weeks on end when he was not tied to the classroom. Even during school terms he would frequently leave to preach in neighboring churches. Families vied with each other to have Unruh as guest. He remarked that he got chicken dinners so often that the chickens ran for their

lives when he arrived on the yard of a farmer host. On one occasion in Kitchener he attempted to hang his coat on the hall tree of his gracious hosts, and accidentally knocked it over and broke it. Naturally he was embarrassed, but his hosts were happy to pay six dollars to have it replaced for the privilege of having Dr. Unruh as their guest. Many who had him as guest in their homes at one time or another testify to the blessing he was to their lives.

Not only in Canada was Unruh in demand, but the American churches and schools also frequently invited him for Bible conferences. At times he would be absent from home for two or three months at a time. He was in demand as speaker at youth rallies, Sunday school conventions, harvest festivals and ordination services, often involving his former students. Students from all over Canada and even from the United States were attracted to the Winkler Bible School; when these returned to their churches they would do their best to encourage their churches to invite Unruh for a preaching mission.

There is one Bible conference—first held in 1927 and now an annual institution of the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church of Winnipeg—at which Unruh served more frequently than at any other. Unruh spoke annually at this conference beginning in 1935 up to 1958. This conference is held for a three day period during the Christmas vacation and is quite ecumenical in its appeal. For 23 years Unruh did his share of teaching the Word of God on this occasion; in this way his influence went far beyond Mennonite Brethren circles.

Although Unruh had been the leader of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Barwenkowo when he taught school in that community, Unruh's Canadian ministry was not limited to any local church. That is not to say, however, that he was not a faithful member of a local congregation, or that he did not serve the local church. In fact, the opposite is true. Not only did he preach frequently in his home church, but in Elmwood, for example, he taught a Wednesday night Bible class for years. Other churches,

however, looked upon him as their servant, too, and so one could say that he was servant of the whole Brotherhood.

### Conference Leader

Because of the confidence which the churches placed in Unruh, he was elected conference chairman again and again at the annual Canadian conventions. Although precise parliamentary procedures did not lie in his area of competence, he was usually able to preserve the spirit of brotherliness in the deliberations. There were some rough stretches during these sessions, but with his good humor and gracious responses he was able to lead these conventions over treacherous rapids without serious disasters. In 1939 he was elected chairman of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Canada and the United States.

Unruh had a deep-seated fear of an episcopalian approach to church government. Authority was to be vested in the Brotherhood and not in individual leaders, although he stressed the importance of spiritual leadership. He was basically opposed to one man doing all the preaching in any given congregation—the ‘pastoral system’ as it was then called. Speaking at a Bible conference in the United States, where this was fast becoming the pattern at the time—with Canadian churches following closely behind—he warned his American brethren that the church which does not have enough vitality to produce workers in the ranks of the membership was doomed.

When Unruh was conference leader he was on the Board of Reference and Counsel by virtue of his office. But even when he was not chairman of the conference, he served for years in this board, which concerned itself with the life and the teaching of the Mennonite Brethren Church. In this way, too, he exercised great influence and gave direction to the Brotherhood.

When he came to the end of this life, it occurred to him that in his voluminous correspondence which he had carried

on when he was a member of the Committee of Reference and Counsel, the names of many brethren were mentioned. He was afraid that a later reader might not understand the context in which these names appeared and these brethren could be incriminated. For this reason he destroyed these files. His children insist that in the process he also, accidentally, burned his autobiography. How one wishes this could have been saved for posterity!

In the years 1945—48 he was Canadian representative on the Tabor College Board. In that position he often warded off attacks that Canadian brethren made on the school. To say the least, he was an ambassador of good will for Tabor College in the 'northern district conference'. At one Canadian conference at which he argued that Canada should support Tabor College, he was accused by a younger brother of 'playing politics'. Unruh then rose to his full height and begged to correct the young brother. There followed a four-point refutation, which made the brother squirm. It was done with authority but not in anger.

He tried never to be absent from the provincial and Canadian conferences, until the weaknesses of old age made it impossible for him to attend. Although he took a vital interest in the work of the church, one never had the feeling that he wanted to 'run' the Brotherhood. He had the grace to be simply one of the brethren. His proposals at these conferences were not always practical or realistic, so his suggestions frequently fell to the ground. Such experiences, however, never soured him.

When in 1959 his eyesight failed and he could not attend the Canadian conferences, he wrote a warm letter wishing the brethren the fulness of God's blessing, thanking them for their prayers on his behalf and assuring them of his continued intercessory prayers. He apologized for his inability to answer the many letters he was receiving from various brethren, and greeted the delegates with the words of Jesus which expressed his sentiment for the Brotherhood, "As he had loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

The last time he attended a Canadian conference was the year before he died. He travelled with his wife all the way from Chilliwack in British Columbia to Ontario. By now he was a man who walked with a white cane. Although his participation in the discussions was limited, he did not miss a single session. That he was deeply concerned about some of the developments in the Mennonite Brethren Brotherhood at the time is understandable, particularly since 1960 marked the centennial of the Mennonite Brethren Church—a church of which he had been a member for some 65 years.

Although Unruh was a dyed in the wool Mennonite Brethren, his heart was open wide for those of other persuasions. Frequently he served outside his own denomination. The divisions among the Mennonite Brotherhood were often a source of grief to him. At an inter-Mennonite gathering, where Unruh addressed the conference, he likened the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites to a pair of trousers, united on top but somewhat divided at their farther reaches. Cut from the same cloth, however.

When a church was formed in Orillia through the mission outreach of the Ontario Mennonite Brethren, the Ontario conference was hesitant to begin with to accept this new congregation, since most of its members were of Anglo-Saxon background. Unruh, however, appreciated the concern of the pastor that this church be a Mennonite Brethren congregation. Today it is a Mennonite Brethren church. Unruh saw clearly that Christ's church is not limited by ethnic boundaries.

During one festive occasion in Russia, at which Mennonites of different persuasion had gathered, Unruh's bias became obvious. He told the audience that he loved all the children of God but admitted that those who were baptized in the 'biblical' way were closer to him. A fine young school teacher who travelled with Unruh on his way home seemed deeply depressed after the meetings. When Unruh inquired after his sorrow, he told him that he was hurt because Unruh had drawn such a sharp line between immersed and

non-immersed believers. The matter took an interesting turn, however, when this school teacher and his wife later joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. (The reader could not have guessed that the young teacher was none other than that saintly brother, Cornelius Wall, who was Unruh's student at Tschongraw, and later had the opportunity to teach together with Unruh at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg.)

### Missionary

While still in Russia, Unruh took a great interest in both foreign and home missions. Two of his own brothers were missionaries in India. His colleague at Tschongraw and Winkler, J. G. Wiens, was a former India missionary. Abram, Unruh's eldest son, also went to India as a missionary. Unruh always reflected a great interest in new mission fields opened up by the Brotherhood. By his own efforts to evangelize the Russian people he demonstrated as well his great burden for the lost in his own community. In 1907 Unruh participated in the founding of the Tract Mission in Barwenkowo, designed to spread the Gospel in Russian and German by means of the printed page.

In Canada he encouraged mission efforts of various kinds—Canada Inland Mission, Mennonite Central Committee and other projects at home and abroad. Under the auspices of the Winnipeg City Mission he preached a great number of radio messages; one collection of these sermons alone runs to 84. At college he taught a course in Mission Principles and Practice. His 'missionary sermons' reflect his deep and abiding interest in the expansion of the kingdom of God among men. Unruh made the observation that a church that meets only to cultivate its inner life and does not engage in mission, is on dangerous ground. He planted the seed of missions in the hearts of a great number of students, and many of our senior missionaries in different countries today are former students of Unruh.

When several college students, on their own initiative, launched a Gospel broadcast (today known as "The Gospel

Light Hour") they were sharply criticized for not working along the lines laid down by the college. Brother Unruh gave them five dollars and wished them God's blessing.

### Defender of the Faith

Unruh was not a controversialist. He was characterized by an irenic rather than a contentious spirit. Heated polemics were not for him. Nevertheless, he had a strong conviction on certain matters of doctrine as well as of ethics. He could at times put his foot down and insist: "Whether others agree with me or not, I will hold to my convictions." When Unruh preached his inaugural sermon in the Karassan Mennonite Church in 1918, just after he had assumed the principalship of the Karassan *Zentral-schule*, he told the vast audience in the presence of presiding Elder Hermann Rempel: "I love you 'Karassaners', but I must also tell you the truth." He then preached a powerful sermon on the 'unfruitful vineyard' (Isa. 5).

On one occasion he preached in Newton, Kansas, where—so he had been told—some members of the congregation held to the notion that every man would get a second chance after death to turn to God. In his opening remarks to this congregation he threw out the question to the audience, "Who believes in a second chance? Please raise your hand!" No hand was raised, so Unruh added: "No one here believes in a second chance. I don't either, and therefore, I want to speak to you about the 'first chance'." With Paul, Unruh believed: "Today is the day of salvation."

One doctrine which he considered to be particularly injurious was that of eternal security, as it was then advocated by some extremists. When in 1935 a pamphlet promoting the teaching of eternal security, written by Frank Isaac of Winnipeg, began to circulate in the Mennonite Brethren churches, Unruh felt he had to take up the cause. He did this by publishing a reply to the booklet: *Kann ein Kind Gottes verloren gehen?* Unruh's reply appeared in print in 1936 and ran to some 25 pages. It has

since been published in pamphlet form by the Christian Press (1964), edited by H. P. Toews. Although Unruh was gracious and winsome in his attack, he felt that Isaac's views were so damaging to the life of the church, that velvet gloves in this instance were not in order. He demolished the writer's arguments one by one by pointing up fallacies in his logic, but above all, by showing how the Scriptures had been misused and made to say what they did not, in fact, say. He found particularly painful the fact that his opponent could claim to have the Calvinist Spurgeon on his side. Unruh knew his Spurgeon well enough to show Isaac that Spurgeon had a more balanced view than the one he was propagating.

Unruh's knowledge of the period of storm and stress in the early history of the Mennonite Brethren Church led him to sound warnings against certain emphases that he thought were detrimental. The stress on inner experience—so pronounced in our Brotherhood in its early stages—had to be coupled with knowledge of Christ and his Word, said Unruh. He was afraid of emotional experiences without objective content. A church would be well advised not to choose for its leader a man who plays on the emotions. He went so far as to say that church members needed instruction in the Word outside of what they received in the Sunday morning sermon, for in the latter, the personal, experiential element might be too dominant.

He realized that much in the theology of the Mennonite Brethren had been borrowed from many different sources. Although he was conversant with the 'Confession of Faith', his interests did not run too deeply along creedal lines. He wanted all teaching to be grounded in the Scriptures. Whether Luther, Calvin, Menno, Wesley or Darby had held to certain points of view did not settle anything. But if these, and others like them, taught what could readily be supported by Scripture, then why should one not learn from them. In a sense it was a somewhat simplistic approach, but refreshing nevertheless.

In the area of eschatology there was considerable

disagreement during Unruh's long Canadian ministry. Dispensationalism had been broadcast in our Brotherhood, particularly through the teaching ministry of Jacob Reimer. Although the approach to future things in this system of interpretation had come into our Brotherhood ultimately from Darbyism, and was not really native to Mennonite theology, it came to be looked upon as Gospel truth. Unruh kept his sanity in it all, and although he too could be called a 'dispensationalist', he concentrated on the great unequivocal truths of the Lord's coming, the final judgment and the glorious hope of the believers, instead of becoming entangled in the intricacies of the end times. Our early brethren, he wrote in an article for a study conference, did not indulge in the minutiae of the last things. The blessed hope was for Unruh, as for the apostle John, a strong motivation for a holy life.

### Author

Unruh not only preached and taught; he also wrote. What he wrote never had quite the sparkle so obvious when he spoke. His strong voice, his dignified appearance and his gestures added a dimension to his preaching and teaching that could not be transferred to the written page. He seemed to need an audience to bring him to life.

A great many of his sermons were published in periodicals. Many of his key-note addresses can be found in conference year books and other bulletins. Almost from the time he set foot on Canadian soil he contributed articles for the monthly journal *Zeugnis der Schrift*, published jointly for a number of years by the Herbert and Winkler Bible schools. The journal was designed to lead serious Bible students to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures. Also, it was to serve as a kind of minister's handbook, since most Mennonite ministers in the twenties were often at a loss when it came to resource materials.

When this publication was discontinued in 1929, Unruh

assumed publishing responsibility for the monthly journal **Die Antwort**. A. A. Kroeker took care of business matters for the publication. Although Unruh tried hard to get teachers from other Bible schools to contribute articles, he was pretty well left to himself and his Winkler colleagues in supplying the articles for the journal. Every issue of the journal carried one or more articles by Unruh himself. Besides, **Die Antwort** always provided Sunday school teachers with lesson materials for the month following. Unruh wrote these lessons, and thereby met a great need in the area of Christian Education. The journal had to be discontinued after two years—not for lack of materials but for financial reasons.

After founding the college in Winnipeg, the faculty there felt constrained to publish a theological journal called **The Voice**. It was to be the 'voice' of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. To this paper Unruh contributed some 30 articles—the last appearing in 1958.

During the larger part of his Bible teaching career, Unruh was engaged in writing Sunday School lessons for the teacher's manuals published by the Mennonite Brethren Conference. If all the pages of Unruh's contributions in these printed manuals were added together, we would arrive at a grand total of some 8000 pages.

Besides writing for various theological journals and denominational papers, Unruh published a number of shorter and longer monographs. Although most of his writings were expositions of the Scriptures often in sermonic form, his last and most comprehensive work was historical. His history of the Mennonite Brethren Church runs to 850 pages and represents a colossal expenditure of time and energy. He completed the rough draft during his last year of teaching at the college; his colleagues were eyewitnesses of the labors that went into this massive volume. He was not a historian in the refined sense of that term, but his deep appreciation for his Mennonite Brethren heritage sustained him in this last great undertaking.

And so, like Abel of old, though he is dead, he still speaks through the written page.\*

\*

The following is a list of Unruh's publications that have appeared in book form: *Die mennonitische Bibelschule in Tschongraw; Eine Einleitung fuer die Lehrer der Sonntags-schule; Leitfaden fuer den Religionsunterricht; Nikodemus: Wie kommt man ins Reich Gottes? Zweiundfuenfzig Predig-entwuerfe; Gottes Wort als Wegweiser fuer die Gemeinde-zucht; Des Herrn Mahnung an die Gemeinde der Endzeit; Der ewige Sohn Gottes (Erbauliche Vortraege aus dem Hebraeerbried); Der Prophet Jesaja; Einundfuenfzig Vor-traege ueber das Buch der Offenbarung; Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde.*



## **Part III**

### **The Last Journey**



## 14

### FAREWELLS

"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

At the age of 75 Unruh was still busy writing the final chapters of his Mennonite Brethren history. It was the last major assignment given to him by the Brotherhood which he had served most of his life. Published sermons, however, continued to appear in print several years after the history had been completed. In the spring of 1954 he bade farewell to his beloved college. In his farewell speech to the college family he confessed that most of his life he had been a double-minded man (Jeremiah would say: he had "a heart and a heart"). Since 1904 he had divided his interests between teaching and preaching. From now on, he said, he would have a single heart, since he was laying aside the teacher's mantle and, as God gave him grace, he would devote himself only to preaching.

The college president, H. H. Janzen, reported with regret that this moment had come. In his report to the Canadian Conference he stated: "We cannot express in words what stirs our hearts as we think of losing Dr. Unruh. We are now to forfeit the benefits of his comprehensive knowledge, his kind and gracious bearing, as well as his great gift of communication. But we must give him up, for he feels led of God to terminate his services." After 60 years of teaching he said farewell to the classroom. How he thanked God for the privilege he had had—to be a teacher all his life and not to turn sour.

Unruh continued to preach for a few more years, severely hampered, of course, by the steady loss of his eyesight. The feeling of helplessness and of dependence on others often depressed him in his old age. His dear Tina proved her love and devotion to her husband by making life as easy for him as she could. He had the grace of retaining a confident outlook on life even in his last days. He wanted to have a happy old age, he said; in his opinion that was incredibly more than to be a "jolly oldster". Growing physical weaknesses, the feeling of loneliness and the reflection on life's failures and disappointments he understood to be God's means of refining and testing him in his old age. To his credit and to the glory of God it can be said that he valiantly bore the burdens of old age.

Because he had a well-stocked memory, his mind remained occupied with meditation on biblical texts. He had a craving for love and fellowship in his last years, that he had not had before. Every visit of friends was appreciated. Mrs. Unruh, who was two years his senior, had the strength and courage to make life as bearable as possible for her aging husband. The desire to be close to their children also became stronger as they got older, and so they decided to sell their house in Winnipeg and move to Chilliwack, B.C., where they could be close to their widowed daughter Lydia. Unruh himself was in the hospital when Mrs. Unruh sold their household goods and the house, in short order. Somewhat facetiously he said to a friend: "I began in Winkler, and I end im Winkel (in a corner)."

In July, 1959, they took leave of Winnipeg and of Manitoba, where they had lived since their arrival in Canada in 1925. In 1960 Brother Unruh said farewell to the Canadian Conference, convening in Ontario. On their return, the Unruhs stopped in at Winnipeg once more, at which time they celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary and said farewell to the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church. He had hoped to attend the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church which met in

Reedley, California, in the fall of 1960, but that hope was not fulfilled. It was the centennial year of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and Unruh, although he found it somewhat hard to accept, had to content himself with being present in spirit only. On the other hand, he was happy in the knowledge that he had completed writing his church's hundred-year story.

Although his physical condition was deteriorating rapidly, churches still invited Unruh to preach; he was happy to proclaim the Good News right to his end. While Unruh made a strong effort, he found considerable difficulty in accepting the fact that he was now an old man. At other times he joked about his weakness. On one occasion when his diabetes was causing him considerable trouble, several brethren paid him a visit to encourage him. He quipped: "All my life I have been too sour, and now I must die from sweetness" (diabetes in German is called **Zuckerkrankheit**—sugar-sickness—and that explains the pun). In his more sober moments, however, he was only too keenly aware of the fact that the days of public ministry were over. Upon occasion he might ask a friend: "Is there still a message in my sermons?" December 26, 1960, he preached his last sermon. His topic was, "And we beheld his glory."

A sample-page from Unruh's many hand-written sermons. This was written when he was almost totally blind. The page is from a series of sermons on the theme of faith in Hebrews 11. The line in brackets reads (in translation): "We do not know how God showed his approval (i.e., of Abel's sacrifice). When we were children we were taught that the smoke of Abel's offering rose to heaven, and that of Cain's fell to the ground."

Faith, it is known - in fact,  
gladly am I glad to say that  
God does work after his kind.  
for Abel is, in effect, a perfect  
example, & Cain is not.  
But when we see God  
do his works before us, & we  
ourselves witness them man-  
ning, has he failed in this that  
he himself has, without us  
the people for the works of God?  
Frankly, who else but the unknown  
God? Am we not to give ac-  
knowledgment now in great need and  
concern that when we have prospered

# 15

## A TIME TO BE BORN, AND A TIME TO DIE

"The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore . . . yet they are soon gone."

Unruh had consented to preach in Clearbrook on January 6, 1961. He was too weak to stand and so, seated on a chair, he began to speak. But he lapsed into a coma and had to be taken to the Abbotsford hospital. As he regained consciousness, he gave one of his nephews the gist of his sermon that he had prepared to preach. It was a well-organized sermon on Matt. 2:1—12.

But his days were numbered. On January 10, 1961, he was transferred to the Chilliwack Hospital. Pastor Isaac Tiessen visited him and read Psalm 23 for him. "Rod and staff," Unruh repeated. Tiessen put his hands on Unruh's and prayed, and Unruh concluded with 'Amen!'. These were his last audible words. Sunday morning, January 15, at the age of 82, he passed on to be with his Lord.

The funeral took place in the auditorium of the Mennonite Educational Institute, Clearbrook, B.C. A vast crowd of friends gathered to pay their final respects to one who had meant so much to all of them. Some fifty ministers were present. Children and grandchildren had come from far and near. Missionary A. A. Unruhs were in India at the time and could not come.

Pastor Isaac Tiessen led in the invocation and gave a brief message on the text: "Yes Father, for so it was well-pleasing in Thy sight" (Mt. 11:26). A male chorus,

comprised of former students of Unruh, expressed their sentiments in song. Conference leaders offered words of condolence, and numerous telegrams were read from individuals, churches, schools and publishing houses. Frank Friesen, Morden, represented the Winkler Bible School, and F. C. Peters, Winnipeg, spoke for the college faculty. (At the college, also, a special memorial service was conducted.) H. P. Toews and B. B. Fast represented the Elmwood Church. Elder Bruno Enns spoke for the General Conference Mennonite Church. Pallbearers were former students: G. Thielmann, D. B. Wiens, H. Brucks, Abe Esau, P. R. Toews, and H. Lenzmann—all ministers of the Gospel. Unruh lay in the casket holding his old and well-worn Bible—symbolical of his life-long passion.

Brother Jacob Thiessen, Vancouver, who took his teacher training in Halbstadt together with Unruh, underscored what others were saying, namely that in spite of all differences of opinion they may have had, Unruh had always been a loving brother. Moderator of the Canadian Conference, F. C. Peters, in his eulogy stressed that Unruh had been (a) a dear brother, (b) a faithful servant, (c) and a loving co-worker.

After the Columbia Bible School choir sang an appropriate song, Isaac Tiessen read the obituary. Aaron Toews, a friend and co-worker of long standing, led in the closing prayer, and with the singing of one of Unruh's favorite hymns, "Take Thou My Hands O Father . . ." the service came to an end. Interment followed at the Little Mountain Cemetery, Chilliwack.

"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith."

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